YUU MIYAZAKI
ILLUSTRATION BY okiura
THE ASTERISK WAR
14. STRUGGLE FOR SUPREMACY

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Noelle Messmer

ROUND 5, MATCH 4
XIAOHUI WU VS. JULIS-
ALEXIA VON RIESSFELD

Black Knight

THE ASTERISK WAR

14. STRUGGLE FOR SUPREMACY

YUU MIYAZAKI
ILLUSTRATION: OKIURA

YEN ON
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THE ASTERISK WAR, Vol. 14
YUU MIYAZAKI

Translation by Haydn Trowell
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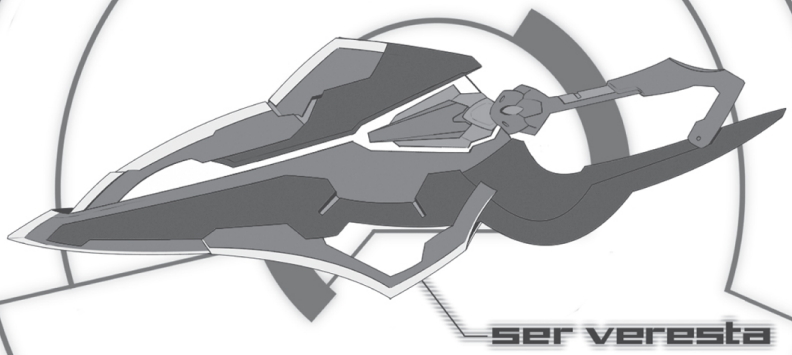

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characters

SEIDOUKAN ACADEMY

AYATO AMAGIRI

The protagonist of this work. Wielder of the Ser Veresta. Alias Murakumo.

ALIAS: Gathering Clouds, Murakumo
ORGA LUX: Ser Veresta

JULIS-ALEXIA VON RIESSFELD

Princess of Lieseltania. Ayato's partner for the Phoenix.

ALIAS: the Witch of the Resplendent Flames, Glühen Rose
LUX: Aspera Spina

CLAUDIA ENFIELD

Student council president at Seidoukan Academy. Leader of Team Enfield.

ALIAS: the Commander of a Thousand Visions, Parca Morta
ORGA LUX: Pan-Dora

SAYA SASAMIYA

Ayato's childhood friend. An expert in weaponry and machines.

ALIAS: none yet given
LUX: type 38 Lux grenade launcher Helnekraum, type 34 wave cannon Ark Van Ders Improved Model, and others

KIRIN TOUDOU

Disciple of the Toudou School of swordsmanship with natural talent. Saya's partner for the Phoenix.

ALIAS: the Keen-Edged Tempest, Shippuu Jinrai
LUX: none (wields the katana Senbakiri)

EISHIROU YABUKI

Ayato's roommate. Member of the newspaper club.

LESTER MACPHAIL

Number nine at Seidoukan Academy. Brusque and straightforward but has a deep sense of duty.

RANDY HOOKE

Lester's partner for the Phoenix.

KYOUKO YATSUZAKI

Ayato and company's homeroom teacher.

PREVIOUSLY IN *THE ASTERISK WAR…*

A year has passed since the end of the Gryps, and Asterisk's strongest fighters have gathered for what is expected to be the greatest Lindvolus in history. Ayato and company collided with formidable opponents right from the get-go…but fortunately, each of them managed to pull through. Meanwhile, Kirin, not having entered the tournament, continued to pursue the Golden Bough Alliance and was attacked by Percival from Saint Gallardworth Academy, only to then be saved by Xiaohui Wu. Claudia discovered that Eishirou had provided their enemies with information on Kirin's whereabouts and blackmailed him into joining their ranks. Now, with the pieces falling into place, Asterisk's sixteen strongest warriors prepare to face off for the ultimate crown…

CHAPTER 1
CONFLICT

"Burst into bloom—*Livingstone Daisy*!"

"Yaaaaaaaaaaaaagh!"

The young man with bristly red hair—Le Wolfe Black Institute's tenth-ranked fighter, Bonifaz Pleise, the Mage of the Howling Inferno, alias Vulcanus—let out a terrible cry as a powerful explosion ran across the stage straight toward Julis von Riessfeld.

The rings of fire that Julis had unleashed were swallowed whole, extinguished and scattered across the field.

"Tch…!" She clicked her tongue in annoyance as she moved to dodge his attack, but the wave of heat that followed it was enough to sear her flesh.

To think his firepower tops my own…!

"It's pretty rare to get two fighters so evenly matched and with such similar skill sets pitted against each other like this, but are we finally nearing the end of the seventh match of this fourth round?! The stage is practically a sea of flame, thanks to the combined efforts of our two contestants—a veritable hellscape!"

"Well, it must be pretty hot down there. I doubt either of them will be able to hold out much longer."

Julis herself knew the truth of those words. Whether she or her opponent managed to land a direct hit on the other, if she kept putting everything she had into jumping around in this heat, her body exuding a cascade of sweat, it was only a matter of time until she collapsed from dehydration—which was why she wanted nothing more than to put an end to this match as soon as possible.

But that was easier said than done.

"Ah, this is the stuff, Glühen Rose! I just can't get enough of this seething heat!"

Bonifaz may have been sweating just as profusely as she was, but unlike Julis, he kept getting more and more excited as the temperature climbed. He was standing more than ten meters away

from her, but his voice was so loud that it seemed like he was shouting right into her ears.

"…Geez. Not only do I have to put up with this heat, I have to deal with this guy, too!"

Her opponent's ability to manipulate flames was largely similar to her own, although the number of techniques he had at his disposal didn't seem to compare to the sheer variety of her own. As simple as they might have been, however, the raw power of his attacks seemed to grow in intensity as he became more and more frenzied.

In other words, his firepower kept rising as he worked himself up. On top of that, his frequent roars were similarly rising in volume—and were no doubt the origin of his alias, the Mage of the Howling Inferno.

"Glühen Rose! It's clear to me that you're the strongest flame user in Asterisk!" Bonifaz declared, finger pointed. "So by taking you down here, I'll seize that title for myself!"

His face was a living portrait of hot-bloodedness. This rowdiness was typical of Le Wolfe students, but at the same time, his directness was decidedly unique among his fellow students.

In any case, the fact that he was still standing was testament to his skill and ability. Julis had fought against several fellow flame users in the past, but none at the level of her current opponent.

"The strongest flame user, huh…? I don't remember ever accepting that title, and I don't really care for it, either. I'm willing to give it to you, if you want it so badly," Julis said as a pair of fiery wings took shape behind her. "But you'll have to give me this match in exchange, Vulcanus!"

"I don't think so! At Le Wolfe, we take what we want through victory! This match is mine! *Raaaaaaaaaugh!*"

At that moment, Bonifaz directed another blast of flames toward her as she climbed high into the air—but the attack flew wide.

They were both most comfortable fighting at long range, but as a result of that, the stage had been rendered a scorching wasteland, with neither party emerging the victor. It would be pure folly to keep fighting the same war of attrition, which meant…

"Burst into bloom—*Anthurium Multifluus*!"

As she swung the Nova Spina downward, a perfect row of eight flaming shields appeared before her.

"I'll blow you and all your defenses away! *Haaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaugh!*" Bonifaz, flexing both his arms, let out a roar so loud that it would have been no surprise if his throat had ruptured—and as he did so, he unleashed a whirlpool of flame larger than anything Julis had yet seen during their match. The incredible amount of energy contained in that oncoming blast must have been on

par with one of Saya's custom-built Luxes.

"Bloom!"

But before that vortex could reach Julis, she aligned the junction pattern of her mana and prana with the six units of her Rect Lux. As a result, her destructive power greatly amplified, albeit only temporarily.

"Raaaa

She knew, however, that she was merely venting her anger.

The figure she saw in the mirror on her desk, sweeping back her loose, wet hair, was practically a stranger.

“Hmph, really… Just who are you supposed to be?” She laughed in self-deprecation, squeezing her face with one hand.

The difference may have been minor, but the face staring back at her wasn’t that of someone who had won every one of their matches thus far. Nor was it the face of the person she had seen in the air-window a moment ago.

“I *thought* things were going too well…”

She had cruised to victory in all three of her matches during the preliminaries. On top of that, having made it into the main tournament, she had managed to emerge victorious without suffering any serious injuries, even though today's fourth-round match had been difficult. Given that so many extraordinarily powerful individuals had entered this year's Lindvolus, it was probably fair to say that Julis had been incredibly lucky thus far.

But despite all that, she didn't *feel* lucky.

Of course, she couldn't say she was unhappy about winning her matches. She couldn't afford to lose if she was going to reach her goal—if she was going to reach Orphelia. According to the recently released tournament brackets, she had been assigned to a different block than Orphelia. That meant she didn't stand a chance of facing her unless they both made it through to the championship.

Also in Orphelia's block were Saya and the two autonomous puppets from Allekant, and perhaps most importantly, Sylvia Lyyneheym, the runner-up from the previous Lindvolus. No matter how secure Orphelia's crown might seem to be, she was going to face some particularly strong opponents.

But…what do I do if Orphelia loses to one of them…?

If that happened, Orphelia's plans—no, the plans of whoever Orphelia had spoken about—would no doubt be pushed forward. Julis couldn't allow such a worst-case situation to occur.

That said, the likelihood that Julis herself would lose before making it to the championship was much higher. After all, her opponent in the next round was Xiaohui Wu.

If she tried to think about it rationally, she knew she had little chance of winning. And even if she managed to pull through, even if she made it all the way to the semifinals, the person she was most likely to face was—

"Ugh…"

She pressed her fist against her chest, as if to restrain her surging emotions.

The inevitable grew closer with every match she won; she wanted to scream in desperation. Perhaps, she considered, things would be easier if she could bring herself to bawl her eyes out, as Bonifaz had done at the end of their match.

"No, that won't help…"

This wasn't the kind of predicament that could be solved with tears. No matter what course of action she chose to pursue, tragedy would be unavoidable. As things stood, all she could do was choose the option that seemed the least bad from her own position.

And right now, that meant pushing through all the way to the championship and *killing Orphelia with her own hands.* If she was being

honest with herself, she wanted a different way to fix this, and she was willing to remain hesitant until right up to the very end. Even so, she had prepared herself for the worst should the time come.

Julis was willing to give up everything—but would she really be able to go through with it? Perhaps, she thought, she would be better off revealing everything she knew to the city guard, or even to Claudia, and letting others handle it.

But if the people Orphelia had told her about were serious, even the integrated enterprise foundations probably wouldn't be able to stop them. Those people had already prepared for all such outcomes and had undoubtedly readied any number of contingency plans.

Julis didn't know who was involved in their plan, nor did she have any idea what their motives were, or any sense of the true size or power of their organization. All she knew was that they were trying to use Orphelia to achieve their own ends and that Orphelia herself didn't have the will to defy them (although Julis was a little doubtful about that—after all, Orphelia was already resisting by informing her of things in the first place, and she no doubt had some further scheme in mind).

Still, Julis was the only one outside the organization who knew about their plan. Her alone. That being the case, she had a responsibility and a duty to do everything she could.

"He would do the same thing in my situation, I'm sure of it," she said with a weak smile as she thought about her most reliable partner.

He was also fighting his way through the Lindvolus with the need to score victory—after all, failure for him meant forfeiting his sister's life.

Julis hadn't heard the details about what had happened to Haruka, but she'd known at once that the reason Ayato hadn't told her was because he didn't want to get her caught up in it. She knew, however, that Haruka had put a stop to some gargantuan conspiracy several years ago. She knew, too, that that group's accomplices were still lurking in the shadows even now. It wasn't hard to infer that there was most likely a connection between the two situations.

Given her limited information, she could do little but speculate, though she suspected the organization was the same one Orphelia had told her about, or else closely affiliated with it. At the very least, Julis saw them both in precisely the same way. If she were to share what she knew with Ayato and the others, there was every possibility that it would be enough to quickly expose their identity once and for all.

And yet there was nothing she could do about it. Orphelia had warned her not to tell anyone else what she had been told, and Julis knew her well enough to know that it was no idle threat.

"Well, it looks like Claudia and Kirin are making a move, so

maybe they won't need what I know…"

Her precious friends.

Unlike those back in Lieseltania—or rather, at the orphanage—her friends here in Asterisk were people with whom she could fight shoulder to shoulder, comrades who would always have her back. Surely they would be able to find a way to help Ayato. She might have put some distance between herself and them, but she believed that from the bottom of her heart.

"So…I just need to take care of what's in front of me, one step at a time," she murmured as she turned her head, tapping her mobile and opening an air-window.

Tomorrow held Round Five—she needed to do everything she could to prepare for it.

Seidoukan Academy had supplied her with a certain amount of data on her opponent. She already had a general grasp of his battle style and tactics, but it would be wise to read every scrap of information to increase her odds of victory.

"Things haven't been too bad up till now, so why did it have to be Hagun Seikun…?"

CHAPTER 2
ROUND FIVE I

"Wow! S-so this is the special viewing lounge?! Man, this place is amazing! You can see the whole stage from up here! There were so many people at the Gryps, all jumping to their feet whenever they got excited—I couldn't see the stage at all! But this is like heaven!"

Korona Kashimaru had run right up to the specially made glass window overlooking the stage at Le Wolfe Black Institute's VIP viewing lounge at the Sirius Dome, her face literally quivering with excitement as she waved her hands back and forth.

"Damn it, Korona! Just shut up for a minute!"

"*Eeep…!* I—I'm sorry!"

"Tch…!" Dirk clicked his tongue as he rested his chin on his steepled fingers.

Despite how long she had been working for him, Dirk still found himself growing enraged at his unworldly private secretary more times than he could count.

He wasn't normally one to care for watching the Festa, but this year's Lindvolus was a special case—this year, he had faithfully come to observe every match in person right from the preliminaries. Not having anyone to delegate the usual petty tasks to, however, had proven to be a hassle, so today he had decided to bring Korona with him—and had regretted doing so almost immediately.

"And that bastard R is as impossible to read as ever…"

He hit a switch with his fingers to enlarge the air-window, glaring at the redheaded young man on the other side.

"And here we are! Le Wolfe's number two has just made his way through the west gate! With that overwhelming ability of his, capable of manipulating his opponent's prana, Rodolfo Zoppo has cruised through the first four rounds without even the slightest hiccup!"

"In the first round, he showed us all that he isn't just a powerful Dante—he's also got a high mastery of various physical combat techniques. His being pitted against the Ser Veresta is going to be the deciding factor in this

match.”

Listening to the announcer, Mico Yanase, and the commentator, Z—or Zaharoula, as she was now known—and watching Rodolfo flash his gleaming white teeth at the crowd as he crossed the bridge onto the stage, Dirk found a torrent of unpleasant memories resurfacing in the back of his mind.

The Institute was a facility that gathered children from all across the world, then investigated and forcefully developed their talents in order to fashion them into valuable commodities. Whether Genestella or regular human, the vast majority of such students were usually orphans or else had been willingly sold to the Institute by their families. Various forms of commodities were produced there, but the main products were fighters, to be sold to private military companies or to Asterisk’s six schools, and those furnished with exceptional intelligence, whom the integrated enterprise foundations purchased as candidates for managerial positions.

Needless to say, Dirk was a regular person of the latter group, while Rodolfo, a Genestella, belonged to the former. By the age of ten, Rodolfo was already being lauded as the Institute’s greatest accomplishment. Dirk, on the other hand, while having performed exceptionally on all the intelligence tests, had always been a hairsbreadth from being cast aside due to his incessantly bad behavior. For the integrated enterprise foundations—or failing that, prestigious families or organizations—a personal record like his was considered a serious defect.

Dirk’s unique talents were borne out by the exceptional results he achieved in every one of his battle simulation tests. No matter how disadvantageous his position, he never gave his ground, never allowed himself to give in to defeat—and no matter how favorable their own state of affairs, his opponents were never able to turn their advantages into victory. It was there that Dirk showed off his talents—in tactical simulations overseeing combat teams and in the management simulations most valued by the foundations—and there that victors and vanquished were born. In fact, the greater the number of his opponents and the greater the complexity of the situation, the more remarkable his achievements.

In other words, Dirk’s talents didn’t lie in achieving victory itself, but rather in obstructing his opponents, in plunging them into chaos, and in forcing them to surrender. Whether or not he himself benefited from those results was immaterial. In short, his talent was the rawest possible manifestation of his hatred and contempt for everything in the world outside himself.

“And now, coming in from the east gate is Seidoukan Academy’s Ayato Amagiri, the Murakumo! Contestant Amagiri has just emerged from

a particularly fierce fourth-round match against Queenvale Academy for Young Ladies' Minato Wakamiya, known as Kennin Fubatsu, and is hoping to score only the second grand slam in the tournament's history…but he'll have to overcome Contestant Zoppo first!"

"Based on what we've seen from Ayato Amagiri's past matches, it doesn't look like he possesses any noteworthy long-range attacks. The Amagiri Shinmei Style does have a school that specializes in archery, but I think it's fair to say that if he were particularly skilled in it, he would have used it in his match against Wakamiya, to capitalize on her weaknesses. The way I see it, no matter how strong he might be up close, if he tries to fight Rodolfo Zoppo at that range, he'll find himself in hot water."

"Oh, I see… So does that mean Rodolfo has the advantage?"

Korona, having seemingly accepted the commentary without question, was watching the air-window wearing an unbelievably stupid smile. She seemed to have already forgotten that Dirk had told her to keep quiet just a short moment ago.

She can be a real pain in the ass…

Dirk, feared and detested even within Le Wolfe itself, had purged the school of any potential opposition to his rule upon assuming the role of student council president. That meant that practically everyone he met tried to suck up to him. Korona was the only person who treated him like a normal human being.

"…It's not that easy. We're talking about Ayato Amagiri here," he answered with a sigh, unable to bring himself to scold her any further.

As much as the fact grated on him, Dirk wasn't blind to Ayato's exceptional abilities. More than anyone else, Ayato had been able to bounce back from one overwhelming disadvantage after another to score victory.

As far as the Golden Bough Alliance was concerned, it would be in their interest for him to ultimately take the championship and bring the tournament to an end, and yet…

Well, then again, Rodolfo isn't going to go down easily, either…

At the Institute, Genestella were required to participate in countless mock battles, but most of Rodolfo's matches had ended up going far beyond that point—he had practically exterminated his opponents, one and all. And Dirk, acting as his commanding officer, had never done anything to stop him.

Even now, at Le Wolfe, Rodolfo kept his distance. It wasn't like they viewed each other as old friends, of course, but Rodolfo had no intention of ever following Dirk's instructions as student council president. That wasn't to say they were hostile toward one another, but before Dirk could even realize what had happened, Rodolfo had gone and secured his own position as the head of the largest mafia group in the Rotlicht.

“To be perfectly honest, I’d prefer that they both bite the dust out there…”

Speaking for himself, that would be his preferred outcome.

“Huh? Did you say something, sir? Anyway, look! The game’s about to begin!” Korona bounced up and down and waved a hand in excitement as she clung to the window.

Too fed up to even respond, Dirk merely glanced toward her for a brief second before returning his gaze to the air-window.

The intimidation emanating from his opponent across the stage was even more daunting than Ayato had expected.

“Ha-ha! So you’re Ayato Amagiri? Hmm, good, good! This’ll be the most fun I’ve had in a while!” Having looked his competition over from head to toe, Rodolfo broke into a self-satisfied grin.

Judging by the data Ayato had studied, and by the recordings of his previous matches, Rodolfo was a particularly hard foe to figure out. At times, he seemed to enjoy one-sidedly trampling his opponents; at others, he would let them attack to their heart’s content, casually withstanding every blow. In short, he seemed apt to change his fighting style at any given moment based on nothing more than his mood.

The data also mentioned that he was the head of a large mafia group, with a record that Ayato could only describe as nauseating. So completely self-centered was he—single-mindedly fixated on satisfying his every desire, without even the slightest shred of concern for the dignity of others—Ayato considered him some kind of vicious demon.

That said, he had no intention of condemning the man. In the Festa, the only thing that mattered was results—that was true for both honest martial artists like Minato Wakamiya and inhuman fiends like Rodolfo Zoppo.

“We’ll see. I don’t know whether I can meet your expectations, but I’m going to give you everything I’ve got,” he replied, activating the Ser Veresta.

“Hah, that’s fine! *I’m* going to put everything *I’ve* got into having a bit of fun!” Rodolfo answered with a flash of his gleaming white teeth, before pivoting and returning to his starting position.

Ayato closed his eyes, taking a deep breath as he readied himself.

“Round 5, Match 1—begin!”

As the automated voice rang out, he didn’t waste so much as a second before opening his eyes.

Rodolfo, however, was still standing imposingly at his starting

position, his arms crossed.

Ayato similarly maintained his battle stance, holding the Ser Veresta at eye level.

"Oh? Neither contestant has moved a muscle! They must be pretty wary of each other, I guess?"

"Naturally. If Ayato Amagiri makes a wrong move, it will all be over. And Rodolfo Zoppo's Rect Lux won't stand up to the Ser Veresta if he doesn't watch out."

Well, he doesn't even look like he's about to use it, Ayato remarked to himself.

Rodolfo possessed two weapons. The first was his Dante ability, capable of directly interfering with the prana of anyone within his range. The second was his Rect Lux, with its considerable destructive power.

As Zaharoula had observed, had Rodolfo activated that Rect Lux, Ayato would have focused first on destroying it. His opponent, however, didn't look to be that foolish.

"Hey, hey! What's all this? You ain't just gonna stand there, are you? Come at me! You're gonna disappoint our audience!"

Rodolfo's tone of voice was provocative, but he did seem to be expressing his honest feelings. And, of course, what he said was true. The crowds, quickly growing impatient at the static state of affairs, began to rain down boos and catcalls.

Something similar had happened in Ayato's match against the twins from Jie Long during the Phoenix. The audience at the Festa, he knew, had remarkably little patience.

"All right, then, if you insist… Let's get a move on!"

He didn't intend to respond to the whims of the spectators, but with that, he began to edge closer to his opponent.

"Ha-ha! That's more like it!" Rodolfo twisted his lips in a satisfied grin, but still he didn't move.

"Haaaaaaaaaaaugh!" Ayato cried, leaping forward—but no sooner did he cross an invisible line than he reversed his momentum, jumping back.

"Eh?" Rodolfo raised a quizzical eyebrow, but Ayato paid him little heed as he began to circle around his opponent's right-hand side before once more edging forward—until he felt a strange shift in the prana in the tips of his toes and immediately leaped backward.

"Ah, I get it. So you're trying to work out my range! Well, I'm sorry to say that if you try that again, I'll blow your toes right off!"

"…That's a bit extreme."

From what Ayato could surmise based on the recordings of Rodolfo's previous matches, his opponent's ability seemed to be effective within about a two-meter radius. That, however, was simply

an estimate. The only way to be sure was to test it for himself.

It doesn't look like it's quite two… Maybe one meter and ninety-five centimeters?

Even a few centimeters could mean the difference between victory and defeat.

Whatever the case, however, it would be impossible for him to attack from outside Rodolfo's range.

Just as Zaharoula had said at the beginning of the match, Ayato had no long-range techniques at his disposal. He hadn't mastered the Amagiri Shinmei Style Archery Technique, and there was no way he could have learned to wield a firearm in the time he'd had before the match (although strictly speaking, the general Amagiri Shinmei Style did have a set of stone-throwing techniques, but there was no way a mere rock would be able to break through his opponent's defenses).

He could have attempted to use a particularly long weapon, like a spear, but that would severely limit the kinds of moves he would be able to pull off outside Rodolfo's range. Similarly, he could try to use Meteor Arts to increase the size of the Ser Veresta, but it would be difficult to wield an oversized weapon from such a distance. On top of all that, no matter how good his timing, he suspected that Rodolfo would be able to block or parry any direct attack.

That being the case—

"Phew…"

Deep in concentration, Ayato brought the Ser Veresta down to his side.

"Oh? So you're finally getting serious about—"

At that moment, Ayato flew right around his opponent, the tip of the Ser Veresta flickering through the air.

He had aimed the blade perfectly. With that trajectory, it should have carved clean through Rodolfo's school crest, and yet—

"Whoa! That's more like it! Talk about fast!"

"Ngh…!"

Rodolfo had leaned backward ever so slightly, causing Ayato's attack to go wide.

"Wooow, th-that was quick! Too fast even to see! And Contestant Zoppo managed to dodge it! Amazing! But why didn't he use his ability just then?"

"He didn't have a chance to. Zoppo's ability works by interfering with the prana of anyone who gets within his range. Naturally, he has to grasp what's going on if he's going to use it."

*"I—I see! In other words…*Contestant Amagiri's movements were too fast for him to fully catch*!"*

There could be no doubting that, with the exception of Orphelia and Lenaty, Ayato had the best overall physical ability of the

remaining sixteen contestants. The only others who could hope to match him were Xiaohui and perhaps Sylvia, using one of her strengthening abilities.

While he might not be at Hufeng Zhao's level, at his maximum speed, it would be difficult even for Rodolfo to catch sight of his movements.

"Ha-ha! Good, good! You're the first person to jump within my range not out of complete desperation! Talk about a nice change of pace! You're as good as they say, huh? Yep, pretty impressive!"

"…"

With his opponent in high spirits, Ayato wordlessly brought the Ser Veresta back down to his side. He had wanted to end the match with that last move, but that couldn't be helped now.

If it didn't work that time, there probably isn't much point trying the same thing again…

No matter how fast he moved, he was, when all was said and done, attacking in a straight line. If his opponent caught on to that fact, it would mean the end for him. He had to settle the match before that could happen.

"…Hrrrgh!" He shifted his position from left to right to prevent his opponent from reading his timing, circling behind him to try to get as close as he could before unleashing his next strike.

"Oh, what's this now?"

Rodolfo glanced over his shoulder, but Ayato had already moved halfway around to his other side, working his way into his opponent's blind spot.

"Now…!" With that, Ayato swept through Rodolfo's range, the Ser Veresta gripped in his left hand as he launched into a deep slash.

"Whoa!"

Once more, however, Rodolfo, as if having anticipated his movements, let the strike brush past him without making contact.

The tip of the Ser Veresta had sent a few strands of Rodolfo's red hair scattering through the air. Ayato watched a murderous glimmer take root in his foe's eyes behind those dark sunglasses.

Crap…!

At that moment, a deathly chill ran down his spine, and Ayato's left arm and leg felt as if they were bursting open.

"Hrrrrrrrk…!"

Losing his balance, he found himself falling to the ground, but he realized immediately that his highest priority had to be putting some distance between himself and his opponent. He paused for a moment to see how badly he had been injured, but fortunately he looked to have suffered nothing worse than a few grisly burns, with his uniform torn through in several places. Thankfully, his hands and joints were

fine, so the damage wasn't enough to stop him from fighting.

"Ha-ha-ha! What's this? Only a light wound? What a shame!"

Rodolfo's grin remained as placid as ever.

To think that he could work that out after seeing it only once…

Ayato's opponent's battle wit was beyond his expectations.

More than anything—

"Amazing! Zoppo not only dodged Amagiri's attack, but countered with a superb move of his own! Then again, he normally takes down his opponents in one hit, so I guess it wasn't particularly effective here…?"

"Amagiri's still moving too quickly. Zoppo still can't fully catch sight of him, so he was only able to reach the outer layer of Amagiri's prana. He normally tries to ignite a destructive blast from deep inside his opponents' bodies, but he wasn't able to do that here. Anyway, isn't the fact that he still hasn't taken a single step *from his starting position pretty incredible?"*

"Huh?! Ah, r-right, he hasn't moved at all!"

Indeed, Rodolfo hadn't adjusted his footing once. Even when dodging Ayato's attacks, he kept his movements to a bare minimum.

The audience, seemingly having noticed this only now that Zaharoula had pointed it out to them, suddenly buzzed with excitement.

"And he's fighting the Murakumo! The same Ayato Amagiri who rose to victory in both the Phoenix and the Gryps! Contestant Zoppo is dodging his attacks without even having to lift a finger! He's certainly earned his reputation as Le Wolfe's number two, that's for sure!"

"It's often said that Le Wolfe's top-ranked fighters are a step above those from the other schools, but Rodolfo Zoppo really drives that point home. Anywhere else, he would probably have made it to the very top."

Ayato had to agree with that assessment.

To begin with, if not for Orphelia, who was so clearly beyond the norm, there was no doubt that Rodolfo would have been Le Wolfe's reigning number one.

On top of that—

"That'll be enough entertainment for the crowds… Now, my turn," Rodolfo said, stepping forward as if having been waiting for this opportunity.

Ayato leaped backward half out of reflex, bracing with his blade.

If he's going to make a move, that might give me a chance…!

While Rodolfo might have already seen through some of his movements, he had yet to fully grasp Ayato's battle form. If Ayato were to counter now with the Tsugomori, one of the Amagiri Shinmei Style, Ultimate Techniques, he suspected that victory would be his. Given that Rodolfo wasn't in possession of an Orga Lux like Minato Wakamiya had been, it would be impossible for him to fully protect his school crest.

Of course, Ayato knew that he was unlikely to escape unscathed, but there was truth to the saying that sometimes you had to lose the battle to win the war. He would have no hope of defeating this opponent if he wasn't willing to take some risks.

"Hmm? Ha-ha… I know those eyes! You want us to take each other down at the same time, eh?" Rodolfo said as he rubbed his chin, evidently having seen through Ayato's plan. "Ha-ha! Good, give it a go! I've got a little something I want to try, too!"

Ayato said nothing, merely squeezing his eyes shut. In the darkness, his heightened senses could make out his opponent's every move.

Calm and composed, Rodolfo began to walk toward him.

Ayato measured the distance in his mind. Three steps to go, two, one—

"Yaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Ayato's body swayed back and forth like a shimmer of hot air as he lunged toward Rodolfo's chest with all his strength. He had achieved the perfect distance, perfect synchronization, all to unleash a single, inevitable blow that couldn't be avoided even if it was anticipated.

"…How about this, then?"

The tip of the Ser Veresta, however, failed to cleave through his opponent's school crest.

Indeed, the blade itself had completely disappeared.

"—?!"

At that exact moment, the prana in Ayato's chest ignited.

"I-is this it?! Contestant Amagiri has just been engulfed in an explosion of prana! B-but it looked like his attack was a second ahead…?!"

"It probably was… But Zoppo must have cut off the supply of prana feeding into the Ser Veresta."

"Ah…! I—I see! The Ser Veresta does demand a huge amount of prana from its user! So that's why its blade disappeared…"

"…Right, so that was what happened…"

Ayato, having been thrown backward by the force of the explosion, and having only narrowly escaped lethal injury, found himself breaking into a strained smile at Zaharoula's explanation.

"Huh? You're saying I screwed up twice…?"

Rodolfo's grin, on the other hand, had completely vanished.

"H-he's okay! Contestant Amagiri has taken damage, but he's still standing! And his school crest is still intact, too!"

The explosion must have been limited to the very center of his chest, as there was a large hole burned through his uniform and undergarments, but it wasn't wide enough to have reached his crest.

"Zoppo hates the idea of taking damage, so it looks like he focused

most of his attention on the Ser Veresta. In other words, his counter was a little late, and he was only able to control the uppermost layer of Amagiri's prana again this time."

"Hah-hah! You must have damn quick reflexes to have pulled yourself out of that in time! Yep, I'm impressed!" Rodolfo barked, nodding as he activated the Lux attached to his right wrist.

A savage cruelty had worked its way into his grin.

"It looks like Contestant Zoppo is finally activating his Rect Lux!"

With that, three large sword-shaped Rect Lux units materialized, surrounding him on all sides.

In his current situation, Ayato knew, this weapon could prove to be a considerable problem.

Maintaining his vigilance so that he would be able to respond to any oncoming attacks, he checked to see whether the Ser Veresta was still working. Having confirmed that it was fine, he returned it to its activation body and switched to a fresh blade-type Lux.

"Wh-what's this? Contestant Amagiri has sheathed the Ser Veresta…? What's going on here? He should be out of Contestant Zoppo's range, so shouldn't he be able to use it again now."

"How stupid are you? What good would a close-range weapon be when he's not even close enough to use it? And what would he do if Zoppo disabled it while he was trying to dodge one of his attacks?"

"I—I see… But in that case, if Contestant Zoppo was close enough to do that, wouldn't he just target Contestant Amagiri instead of his weapon…?"

"This gives Amagiri options. Is he going to make Zoppo think he's coming at him and instead go for his Rect Lux, or is he planning to deal a direct blow? So long as he's using the Ser Veresta, Rodolfo Zoppo is in control of the situation, not Ayato Amagiri. This changes things."

It was more than a little creepy just how accurately Zaharoula had read Ayato's intentions. In any event, so long as Ayato was using a regular Lux, he didn't need to worry about Rodolfo deactivating it when he got too close. But perhaps more importantly, it was surprisingly difficult for Ayato to focus his attention on both his sword and his opponent.

Not only that, but Rodolfo was unlikely to attack with his Rect Lux so long as Ayato was wielding his Orga Lux—although Rodolfo could likely now approach with minimal risk. That was what had Ayato most on edge.

It's not like I don't have any strategies using the Ser Veresta…but it would be a big risk, and the odds don't look good…

"Come on, let's have some fun!" Rodolfo declared with his arms outstretched—and at that moment, the three units of his Rect Lux came hurtling toward Ayato.

“Ugh…!”

Ayato braced himself with both hands as he parried the first unit, but the sheer weight behind it was far beyond his expectations. Each of those Rect Lux units was almost as long as he himself was tall. And to top things off, they had him surrounded on three sides as they lay in their assault.

As the second unit swept across in an attempt to knock him off his feet and the third unit thrust down from above, Ayato stepped back to evade the attacks, only to find that Rodolfo had moved into position behind him.

Thanks to the fact that he had already entered the state of *shiki*, he managed to change course just in time, but the first unit of the Rect Lux was already coming back around to block him.

“What’s wrong now? Don’t tell me you’re gonna run? Ha-ha!” Rodolfo guffawed.

Ayato had little trouble weaving past the oncoming weapon. His opponent’s control over the Rect Lux wasn’t particularly precise, and while they certainly packed power, his ability to operate them paled in comparison to Julis’s. If all Ayato had to worry about were those three units, he would probably be able to keep dodging them indefinitely.

Rodolfo had no doubt realized that, too.

For him, the Rect Lux was merely a way of keeping Ayato tied down. Rodolfo was always going to want to end this match with his own ability. That weapon of his was merely a means of driving out his prey.

All I need is one moment; if I can just make an opening…!

He staved off the next wave of his opponent’s attack, waiting for an opportunity to reveal itself.

With Rodolfo dividing his attention between the three units, it was unlikely that he would be able to maintain his previous reaction speed. There was still a chance that Ayato would be able to counter.

And so he had no choice but to endure the current onslaught.

“Right! How about this, then?!”

“Ngh…!”

The three Rect Lux units each began to spin through the air as they descended yet again. Ayato managed to catch the blow, but the Lux in his hand let out a horrendous shriek. The power each weapon possessed was simply too different. If he kept on catching his opponent’s attacks directly, his own Lux would end up breaking sooner or later.

Of course, dodging them all wouldn’t be easy, either.

Rodolfo’s eyes glimmered as he awaited his chance to deal a crushing defeat. If he wasn’t careful dodging his foe’s attacks, Ayato knew, he would find himself falling prey to that destructive ability.

If he was going to prevent that from happening, he needed to maintain complete awareness of his situation and his surroundings.

He devoted every last ounce of his concentration to dodging the attacks from that Rect Lux—to catching them all and parrying them aside. With every brief letup in the assault, he pulled farther away from his opponent, circling around so that he wouldn’t find himself falling victim to some other lethal blow. But just how long, he wondered, would he be able to endure this one-sided onslaught?

The change was almost imperceptible, but the movements of his opponent’s Rect Lux were beginning to lose their edge.

Just as I’d hoped…

It was impossible to tell from his expression, but Rodolfo was in all likelihood beginning to tire. Rect Luxes required considerable focus and concentration to operate, and as they went up in size, their users required ever more mastery over their prana. Rodolfo, naturally, would be well aware of that fact.

But, Ayato wondered, had he ever experienced the reality of it firsthand?

Not even two years had passed since Rect Luxes had first been introduced. It might indeed have been possible for Rodolfo to master his weapon over such a short span of time, but given his tremendous power, second at Le Wolfe only to Orphelia, Ayato doubted he had yet to wield it throughout a prolonged match.

"Tch…!"

At last, the movements of his Rect Lux units had become unmistakably disordered.

Now…!

Sensing his chance to snatch victory, Ayato weaved through the gap between the three units of that Rect Lux and in one rapid lunge approached his opponent.

"Amagiri Shinmei Sword Style, First Technique—*Tower of Grit!*"

With a bright flash, he directed his blade into the ground, the impact causing a wall of sand to rise up in front of him.

"What the…?!"

It was a simple smoke screen, ineffective under most normal circumstances—but with Rodolfo in his present state, it would likely dull his senses.

Third time's the charm…

Now was his chance—and having decided that, Ayato prepared to lay in his final attack.

"…What's this, then?" Rodolfo broke into a loud laugh.

"Ugh!" Driven purely by instinct, Ayato leaped sideways as the Rect Lux units, now inflated to almost twice their original size, came swooping toward him from behind.

Meteor Arts with a Rect Lux…?!

"Ha-ha-ha! You should always save your best card for last!"

Unable to withstand the oversized weapons with his regular Lux, Ayato was thrown across the stage—and while he managed to parry two of them, the third tore right through his leg.

"Gah…!"

Falling to one knee, he braced himself to meet the blades as they swooped down for a follow-through strike, when—

"Whoa…!"

Ayato activated the Ser Veresta, forcing Rodolfo to pull back, flustered.

“Hey, hey! Watch it…! You must be getting pretty desperate if you’re pulling that out again!”

Indeed, given that Rodolfo could simply deactivate it, an attack with the Ser Veresta would prove completely ineffective.

Under any normal circumstances, that was.

“Well, it’s not like you can run away anymore, with that leg! Damn, this’ll be fun! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Ayato readied himself as his opponent approached.

Rising unsteadily to his feet, he held the Ser Veresta out horizontally, sure that victory was within his grasp.

Staring back at him, however, Rodolfo still showed no sign of letting down his guard as he drew ever closer. Just before Rodolfo had come near enough to catch him, Ayato slashed with the Ser Veresta.

“Eh? What’s that supposed to be?” Rodolfo tilted his head in bewilderment.

Of course, the Ser Veresta hadn’t been long enough to reach its target.

But that was fine.

What Ayato had just aimed at, and burned through spectacularly, wasn’t Rodolfo himself or his school crest.

“Wha—?!”

His opponent, realizing only too late what had just happened, wore an expression of stark astonishment, shock giving way to panic as he hurriedly attempted to retreat.

Ayato, however, was one step ahead.

Flicking his wrist back, he lunged forward with the Ser Veresta, carving the blade straight upward.

“Amagiri Shinmei Sword Style, First Technique—*Twin Serpents!*”

That one strike cleaved Rodolfo’s school crest clean in two.

“End of battle! Winner: Ayato Amagiri!”

“Huh? Wh-what just happened…?” Mico’s puzzled voice echoed throughout the silent arena.

“Unbelievable… Ayato Amagiri just cut through the mana itself.*”*

“Huh? Th-through the mana…? Wh-whaaaaat?!”

Indeed, Zaharoula was right on the mark.

Ayato had used the Ser Veresta to cut through all the mana surrounding him. He had never before attempted to do such a thing and hadn’t known whether it would work, but given his situation, it had been the best option he could come up with.

Of course, the Orga Lux had successfully burned through the abilities of countless Stregas and Dantes in the past, but doing so had always relied on its user successfully identifying their target.

In that respect, Rodolfo's ability differed drastically from those like Julis's flames or Orphelia's poison, in a way that made it impossible to identify a concrete target. Not even the Ser Veresta could cut through a target that couldn't be grasped.

That left only one option.

While Rodolfo's unique Dante ability allowed him to control other people's prana, like all abilities, it still took effect through the medium of mana. As such, with his first slash of the Twin Serpents, Ayato had burned through all the mana surrounding him—and in the absence of mana, Rodolfo had been unable to manifest his ability.

Nonetheless, the world was filled with mana. What Ayato had done was akin to forming an air bubble around himself while underwater for the briefest of moments. It would take less than a second for that space to be reclaimed.

Mana worked the same way. The space he had carved around himself, and his chance to secure victory, had lasted only for the blink of an eye. That was why, after confirming that he could indeed pull it off, he had chosen the Twin Serpents to deal the final combination.

"Hah…! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Yes! Amazing! I never even imagined that someone could come back from that position! Holy hell! That was incredible!"

Rodolfo, pressing a hand against his forehead, had broken into wild laughter.

"I may be as selfish as they get, but you've earned my respect, Ayato Amagiri! Put everything you've got into it and make that crown yours! Oh man!" he declared in parting, before strolling off the stage quite as if he himself were the victor.

"Phew…"

After watching his opponent disappear through the gate, Ayato found himself falling flat on his back. And with that, he closed his eyes, listening in darkness as the thunderous applause bore down on him.

*

"Well, then, Elliot, I have to go!"

In her prep room at the Procyon Dome, Noelle Messmer, the Witch of Holy Thorns, alias Perceforêt, grasped her hands in front of her small chest as she flashed her childhood friend Elliot Forster a shy smile.

"I told you not to be so familiar… Ah, I guess it doesn't matter. Anyway, I doubt we've seen everything your opponent has up her sleeve. Be careful."

"I will."

That opponent was Jie Long Seventh Institute's Fuyuka Umenokouji, the third-highest ranked of the school's Page Ones and private student of Noelle's own teacher, Xinglou Fan (although strictly speaking, Xinglou seemed to treat her more like a dabbler than a true disciple). In her previous matches, she had achieved victory after summoning up a variety of creatures she called *shikigami;* she had yet to show what she herself was capable of. There was little mistaking, however, that she possessed a high level of ability.

"All I can do is cheer you on from the sidelines…but do your best."

"Not at all! I couldn't ask for anything more than to have you supporting me, Elliot!" Noelle shook her head as she spoke, before glancing at him with upturned eyes. "Ah… B-but, you know, if it's all right… I mean, you could… Like you used to…" Unable to finish her sentences, she trailed off, until all she could do was wriggle nervously in front of him.

"Huh…? Ah, right…"

Elliot quickly realized what she was asking of him. He glanced around and then, awkwardly avoiding her gaze, held her in a warm embrace and, as if reassuring a child, patted her gently on the back.

When Noelle had been bullied in school as a child, Elliot had often comforted her like this. No matter how often the other children hid her things, no matter how much she was ignored or treated like a monster for being a Genestella, and even when she had been subjected to violence—whenever tears had been the only thing left to her, it had always been Elliot in whom she had found warmth.

"…Thank you, Elliot. I'm going to win, just you watch." She pressed her head lightly against his chest, before abruptly pulling away and flashing him a brave smile.

"I know you can do it, Noelle."

"Yep!"

She gave a deep nod and then ran off down the corridor.

He was her strength. And with him supporting her, she had no intention of losing, no matter who her opponent was.

Elliot had recently become the subject of considerable criticism due to the incident surrounding the Black Knight. His position at the academy had undoubtedly fallen yet again, and Noelle knew that people were whispering all kinds of unfounded rumors. But Elliot, she knew, had done nothing to be ashamed of.

To begin with, it had been the academy's upper management that had entered the Black Knight into the tournament—the IEF Elliot-Pound. There was no factional infighting among the highest executives, since they had all been subjected to considerable mental adjustment programs, but it was likely that someone a few ranks below was trying to make their presence felt. There would naturally be individuals within the foundation who would be less than pleased with the fact that Elliot, having been named after his prominent forefather, was on track to become the first Genestella to ever enter the organization's highest ranks. That being the case, it was much more likely that the Black Knight had been entered into the Lindvolus not to improve the academy's overall score, but rather to damage Elliot's standing and reputation. After all, if anything were to go wrong, it would be the student council, as the academy's highest autonomous body, and he himself as its head, who would inevitably take the blame.

Noelle, however, already knew just how unreasonable the world was. No matter whether one was in the right, no matter how kind or gentle one was, no matter how much effort one put into helping those below oneself, one would always be met with unreasonable spite. The world was twisted and ruthless—and right now, that distortion was directed squarely at Elliot.

Noelle would protect him from all that. Just as he had protected her.

She braced herself as a wave of dazzling light and roaring cheers descended upon her as she passed through the entrance gate.

"And now, coming out of the west gate, we've got Saint Gallardworth Academy's number seven, Noelle Messmer, the Witch of Holy Thorns, Perceforêt! Just look at that effervescence as she dashes onto the field!"

"Yep, she's certainly full of energy, that one."

At any other time, Noelle would have found herself paralyzed to think that so many people were focusing squarely on her. When she had participated in the Gryps, she had shared the limelight with her teammates. Now, however, she was fighting alone—and yet in spite of that, she could feel the energy welling up inside her.

She ran across the bridge leading from the gate on a single breath, before leaping down onto the stage.

Fuyuka, her lips curled in a graceful smile, was already waiting for her.

"Well, well, aren't we in high spirits today."

"Sorry to keep you waiting…"

"Oh, I don't mind," Fuyuka replied, raising her hand to conceal a light chuckle.

With her long black hair, graceful narrow eyes, and elegant mannerisms, she was the spitting image of a princess from a Japanese fairy tale. As it happened, the Fuyuka family did seem to have a particularly long history, and the techniques she used weren't the usual *seisenjutsu* of students from Jie Long, but rather private secrets passed down through the generations. From what Noelle had heard, it seemed that not even Gallardworth's secretive intelligence organization Sinodomius had been able to uncover anything more precise than that.

If Asterisk's best intelligence-gathering network couldn't find anything, then there's nothing for it. I'll just have to do my best…!

Reassuring herself in an attempt to strengthen her resolve, she activated her staff-shaped Lux.

Fuyuka, looking on, pulled out her enchanted folding fan, letting it flutter through the air as she moved to her starting position.

"Round 5, Match 2—begin!"

As the automated voice sounded throughout the stadium, Noelle activated her ability. A verdant carpet of thorns erupted beneath her feet, quickly eating into all her surroundings.

"Here it is! Contestant Messmer's area ability! These thorns of hers can cover the entire stage in a flash! You wouldn't think someone as cute as her could be capable of such a nasty attack!"

"That area ability will probably take a bit of time to fully activate, but she's certainly much faster at deploying it now than she was during the Gryps. It's pretty impressive."

The announcer, Nana Andersen, along with the commentator, Chitose Sakon, were the same as during last year's Gryps, so they knew what they were talking about.

At the Liangshan, Noelle had focused on developing her abilities. A Strega's abilities were inherently linked to their strength of will and were, in a very real way, a mirror of their innermost self. And so her own abilities, taking the form of a forest of thorns, were based on her reserved and withdrawn nature.

Developing and extending one's abilities meant analyzing and understanding one's true self. As unpleasant as it had been, Noelle had directly confronted her weak heart and strengthened her powers. It was a grueling process—but thanks to it, she had made dramatic progress. Her final rank at the Liangshan had been that of *otsubu*, second from the top, but for an ability that in the past had only been suited to support, the speed of deployment, the strength, and the range she had been able to achieve were remarkable.

"Now go!" she commanded, and the forest of thorns suddenly

undulated, speeding toward Fuyuka like a tsunami.

"Why, if it isn't just like Birnam Wood. I suppose that makes me Macbeth?" Fuyuka said with a carefree laugh as she turned over her fan. *"Jí jí rú lu lìng, chì!"*

That low, whispering voice echoed across the stage—and with it, countless *shikigami* emerged from the air to protect their summoner.

The first was a huge one-legged monster, followed by a giant spider-like creature with horns like a bull, the next flames in the shape of a jeering skull… One after another, grotesque monsters of all shapes and forms began to tear into her wave of thorns with their fangs and claws, until they had brought its advance to a sudden halt.

"And here we are, Contestant Umenokouji's veritable pandemonium of shikigami*, the Hyakki Yakou! Just look at them tear right into that wall of thorns! No matter how many times I see them, they still give me the creeps!"*

"Th-there's nothing scary about it, right? N-not at all! Seriously! I'm fine with it, really!"

It wasn't long before the army of *shikigami* successfully broke through Noelle's advance. But the time it took them to do so wasn't enough.

Before her eyes, the wide swaths they had torn through her thorns began to regenerate, just as more surged from behind.

"Mow them down!"

The blanket of thorny ivy pressed forward as instructed, stretching out into a huge whip and cutting through the *shikigami*. With each swing of that weapon, at least a dozen of the summoned creatures were swept away in clouds of smoke—and while there were many of them, individually, they weren't particularly sturdy.

"Oh dear, my poor little *shikigami*…"

Fuyuka broke into a sorrowful frown, but her creatures had become so few in number that they were no longer able to fully protect her.

If I can just keep this up…!

Noelle's forest of thorns had already wrapped around the defensive line of the *shikigami* and were close to bearing down on Fuyuka.

The true power of area abilities lay in controlling the battlefield itself. Now that Noelle had come this far, she had the unmistakable advantage.

"Hmm, you've done better than I thought…" Fuyuka chuckled to herself. "Well, I must say that I was growing bored, so now would be a good time…"

She clicked her folding fan shut and returned it to her pocket.

"I beseech thee, oh Taisai, that Ouban's comet drive out evil, that thou

grant me the protection of the Dragon King of the Sea…," she intoned, making a sequence of hand gestures at an unbelievable speed, before finally bringing her right hand down in a chopping motion. *"Jí jí rú lu lìng, chì!"*

Less than a second later, Noelle's tide of thorns broke through the defenses of her opponent's *shikigami* and seemed to swallow her whole.

However—

"Huh…?!"

With a brilliant flash of red light, the thorns surrounding her foe were pushed aside. When the light abated, Fuyuka was standing there looking invigorated, without even having broken a sweat. The problem now was the giant demon looming over her—more than two meters in height, its muscular body covered with deep-red skin. Two horns sprouted from its forehead, and it had three brilliant eyes. It was clothed in an old-fashioned suit of armor, and in its right hand it grasped a huge double-edged ax. A thick chain dangled from the handle, the end of which the demon held in its left hand.

A new shikigami*…? No, wait, that's…!*

The moment Noelle's eyes fell upon that figure, she felt a sense of dread that she had never before experienced course through her body—or perhaps, she wondered, the feeling was more akin to awe? She found her legs trembling at the sight of the bizarre, intimidating monstrosity.

"Ah, thank you, Gigoku. You're such a wonderful help."

And then the creature Fuyuka had called Gigoku began to speak: "If you are in need, Master, you should have summoned me sooner. Though this be but a game for you, your foe plays it in earnest."

"Wha—?! It talked?! H-hold on, the shikigami *talked?! Chitose!"*

"That's… I suppose it's not just acting autonomously, then… It must have real intelligence if it can communicate like that… But I've never seen a Strega or Dante do anything like that before… It's impossible! It's beyond even Ernesta's puppets…!"

It seemed that even the commentator Chitose, a graduate of Allekant, couldn't believe her eyes.

Noelle, however, had already returned to her senses.

She called back the thorns that still blanketed most of the stage, weaving them into a different shape. This new *shikigami* looked to be much stronger than the previous ones. If she was going to win, she would have to put everything she had into this contest.

"Titan of thorns, come forth!"

For Elliot's sake, she couldn't afford to lose now. No matter what happened, she had to win.

"Oh… You have a bold spirit, child."

At that moment, as she exchanged glances with the *shikigami*—Gigoku—she was engulfed by her summoned thorns. They lifted her high into the air, and in her place rose a towering humanoid figure.

The titan she had weaved out of her thorns was almost ten meters in height—at least three times the size of Fuyuka's Gigoku.

Noelle had been focusing on more than just polishing her Strega abilities at the Liangshan. Her training with Xinglou had been based on real combat, so she had been forced to pick up a few close-combat techniques whether she had wanted to or not. Without such moves, she wouldn't have lasted a minute against her teacher. Even Noelle, who normally kept to the rear guard, couldn't escape that reality.

And so she had crafted this giant being to best apply the hand-to-hand techniques she already knew. Weak and fragile as a Genestella in her own right, she had compensated by using her abilities to fashion this suit of armor.

"Raaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Moving to Noelle's bidding, the thorny titan raced toward Gigoku, slamming its fist down on it.

"…Alas, it is but a mere trifle." Gigoku, however, with a simple swipe of its ax, sent the titan's arm flying from its shoulder—and, through some means Noelle couldn't fathom, stopped the thorns from regenerating.

"Erg…!"

She struck again with her remaining arm, but her foe destroyed that, too, just as easily.

"Too weak."

"It isn't over yet!"

If she couldn't regenerate the lost limbs, she would simply weave the titan anew.

Since she had entered the tournament, she could sense that her abilities had developed even further. She didn't waste so much as a second before sending a geyser of thorns greater in number and faster than ever before hurtling toward Gigoku.

"Oh dear, that *is* something," Fuyuka chuckled.

But even with the attack descending on them, neither she nor her *shikigami* showed any sign of concern.

"Zhǎn…!"

Gigoku moved to protect Fuyuka, swinging its ax as if it were a sickle and chain, cleaving her titan in half from top to bottom.

"Graaaaaaaaah!"

As a last resort, Noelle directed the remaining parts of the titan to fall toward her opponent, hoping to crush her underfoot, and yet—

"Yes, a fine spirit…"

The moment the fallen titan made contact with the palm of

Gigoku's outstretched hand, her giant foe blew each and every thorn Noelle had put into it away with a tremendous shock wave.

Noelle, caught in the middle of the powerful impact, felt herself wavering in and out of consciousness.

"End of battle! Winner: Fuyuka Umenokouji!"

The last thing she heard was the automated announcement signaling the end of the match, followed by Fuyuka's cool, tranquil voice, like chimes ringing in the distance: "Good work, Gigoku. I see you haven't put those thousand years of yours to waste."

CHAPTER 3
ROUND FIVE II

Not even *they* knew the specifics of how or when they had been born. Even from their earliest memories, they had already been themselves. They had been born to an executive at Elliot-Pound but had been cast aside immediately upon realization of their unique nature, and then they had been entrusted to the care of a facility affiliated with the foundation. When it finally came to light that they were a Dante with a singularly terrifying ability, they had been transferred to a military facility, before eventually winding up in the care of Saint Gallardworth Academy's intelligence organization, Sinodomius.

That was the full extent of their personal history. They had always been the cause of problems no matter where they had found themselves and had never been able to fit in. They had neither friends nor guardians nor confidants—nor, for that matter, did they need such people. It was enough just to have themselves.

There were twelve of them in total—their serious natural-born leader Aigredure, the weak-hearted and quick-to-tears Almace, the blunt yet kind-natured Balisarda, the cool and composed Baptême, the childlike and selfish Florence, the envious and mistrustful Belan, the frivolous and jovial Clarmie, the quiet and languid Floberge, the taciturn and militaristic Glorieuse, the vulgar and short-tempered Goltmale, the flamboyant and hedonistic Murgleys, and the brooding and melancholic Tranchera—and they recognized, respected, and acknowledged each other implicitly, with no one personality dominating the others.

Of course, there were some personalities that didn't always get along with each other, and it wasn't rare for them to quarrel among themselves, but none of them had ever broken their agreed system of letting a different personality rise to the surface with each new day as a way of giving every one of them an equal share of control. They understood just how different they were, how everyone else in the world viewed them—and they understood also that they were the only

ones in whom they would ever be able to find comfort.

That was why, when they had been asked to decide on a single name upon entering Gallardworth, they had decided unanimously not to take the name of any one of them but rather to create a new appellation: the Black Knight. Their individual names had all been taken from tales that they had read long ago, while the title of Black Knight provided them with a feeling of solidarity.

If there was any one reason why the Black Knight had entered the Lindvolus, it was simply that they had been ordered to do so. They each had their own interests and preferences, but as the Black Knight, there was no one wish they all wanted to have granted.

That said, if they had to come up with a wish, it would probably be that they could live as they were now forever. That was why the Black Knight fought as instructed—because by doing so, they could guarantee their present state of affairs.

"Heh-heh-heh… So it's finally my turn. It's about time!"

In their dark prep room at the Canopus Dome, a solitary figure sat muttering to themselves cheerfully on the sofa—but it wasn't long before their brows knitted in a frown.

"We get it, Belan. Seriously, can't you give it a rest? There's no way we're going to lose."

The figure—the Black Knight—lifted both hands into the air in exasperation, when their lips suddenly twisted into a dark grimace.

"Quiet! Who are you to talk, Glorieuse?! You can barely even wield a sword! Just watch, I'll…! Damn it! Murgleys, what the hell are you…?!"

Only the Black Knight's voice echoed throughout the prep room. There was no one else.

They continued their debate until finally the time came for them to go to their match—or rather, until just before they entered the stage.

"Okay, it's finally time! First up we've got Seidoukan Academy's number eleven, Lester MacPhail, who has breezed through all his matches thus far with his overwhelming power! And on the other side we've got this year's dark horse, seemingly unconcerned about the penalty he received for his brutal rampage earlier in the tournament, Saint Gallardworth Academy's Black Knight! Keep your eyes peeled, folks, 'cause only one of them can come out of this match on top!"

"H-hold on, Christie, calm down…"

Listening as the commentator, Ren'ya Gotou, attempted to calm the announcer, Christie Baudouin, Lester grasped his favorite Lux, the Bardiche-Leo, in one hand as he sized up the competition.

His opponent, with his rainbow-colored hair and leather mask,

and brandishing a pair of long knife-type Luxes, was the very image of abnormality.

The Black Knight, huh…? He may be a Dante with multiple personalities, but that's too *shady…*

That ability of his, by which he had clad himself in some kind of dark mud during the preliminaries, did indeed look powerful, but its user had also been particularly reckless. Normally, a contestant who lost his head like that and assaulted his opponent beyond what was necessary would have been disqualified. Gallardworth's official explanation had tried to brush it aside by claiming that he'd lost all restraint, but that was difficult to believe as well. And the fact that the Executive Committee had taken that account hook, line, and sinker and merely halved his awarded points as a penalty was even harder to accept.

"Ah? Hey, you! You got something to say to me?!" the Black Knight called angrily, having clearly lost his patience.

"…Not really."

"Damn it, does everyone here think they can look down on me?! I'll hack you to pieces in no time, just wait!"

"Right, right, whatever you say," Lester replied as if brushing away a barking dog, before heading toward his starting position.

Lester didn't resent his opponent or anything of that sort. Up until just a short time ago, he, too, had been far from a saint. He had been quick to anger, and when things hadn't gone his way, he had been the first to find fault. A certain rival of his had always managed to incense him beyond reason, but it was that same rival who had prompted him to take a careful look at his own failings and mend his ways.

That person was Julis-Alexia von Riessfeld.

He had challenged her on several occasions in the past, but he knew that their respective levels of ability were beyond compare. After all, she was one of the current title holders of the Phoenix and Gryps.

He would have been lying if he said he wasn't jealous of her success. That very success, however, had proved to be an opportunity for him to reevaluate his own weaknesses. Because as long as he couldn't recognize those faults, he would never be able to win against her.

And once Lester had realized all that, Xinglou Fan had appeared before him.

"That brute strength of yours is promising. If you have a barrier you wish to overcome, follow me."

That was what Xinglou had said to him when she had invited him to train at her private school, the Liangshan. It was thanks to her that he had made it this far through the Lindvolus.

If he managed to win this match, if he managed to break through to the next round just as Julis had, he would come face-to-face with her in the quarterfinals. That being the case, he couldn't afford to lose now.

"Round 5, Match 3—begin!"

"Hey, now! Pay attention!"

By the time Lester returned to his senses, the match had already gotten under way.

The Black Knight, his head tilted back, flipped his knife-type Luxes around, gripping them underhand as he charged forward. Then, keeping low to the ground, he lashed out diagonally with both weapons.

As Lester stepped backward to evade the strike, the Black Knight followed through with a rapid succession of additional slashes—but Lester continued to dodge each of them with a minimum of movements.

"The match has just gotten under way, but the Black Knight has already unleashed a ferocious flurry of attacks! With that flexibility of his, he can really put just about any challenger on the back foot once he gets close enough!"

There was no denying that those movements were incredibly fast.

The Black Knight may have been unranked, but in terms of skill and ability, he was certainly on par with other Page Ones.

But it would amount to *nothing*.

"Is that all you've got?"

"What?!"

"That won't work. You're swinging those things around like an amateur relying purely on physical strength and speed. I don't know what it's like to have multiple personalities, but whichever one of you was wielding that blade in the second round was much more impressive." Lester's voice was filled with disappointment.

"Argh! H-how dare you! I'll kill you, damn it!"

The Black Knight grew incensed, his face turning bright red as he intensified his attacks. Even so, he merely grew even more sloppy, none of his strikes even coming close to reaching their target.

That was to be expected. Over the past year, Lester had been at the receiving end of much harsher attacks during the course of his training.

"Damn you, damn you, damn you! I'll end you!"

The Black Knight, having flown into a rage, adjusted his grip on the knife in his right hand, lunging forward in an attempt to drive it straight into his chest. Lester, however, spun around, casually

grabbing his opponent by his outstretched arm and hurling him across the stage.

"Wh-what?!"

Lester didn't waste a moment before leaping after him and bringing the Leo down with all his strength. "It's over!"

Even if he focused his prana in an attempt to withstand the attack, the Black Knight wouldn't be able to escape this move unscathed, nor would his school crest survive intact.

"Auuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuugh!"

The Black Knight crashed to the ground about ten meters away from him, before rolling into a ball and tumbling across the stage.

"Whoa! Is it over already?!"

If the Black Knight's battle ability depended on the dominant personality at any given moment, then Lester looked to have hit the jackpot. There was no point waiting to confirm his opponent's state—he would settle the match now.

Or so he thought.

"…Well, I didn't *think* it would go that smoothly." With a bitter smile, he rested his weapon atop his shoulder.

This was the main tournament of the Lindvolus—the fiercest arena in the whole world. No matter who his opponent was, things weren't going to be *too* easy.

"N-no, wait! The Black Knight is still raring to go!"

"D-damn you!" The Black Knight's eyes burned with rage as he rose to his feet, a mudlike blackish substance welling at his chest. Within moments, that substance began to spread over his whole body.

"Listen up, you…! I swear, I'll finish you one of these days—"

But before he could finish speaking, the dark mud engulfed him. It began to take the shape of a suit of Western-style armor, with twin horns sprouting from its helmet and a gigantic broadsword in its hand. This was the demonic creature that had risen to the fore during the preliminaries.

The only thing that had Lester somewhat concerned was the fact that the Black Knight's prana had seemed to start fluctuating the moment that mudlike substance had appeared.

"Here it is, here it is! The Black Knight's ability that caused such a fuss in the preliminaries! Gallardworth's student council president called it invincibility*, but I wonder just how true that is?"*

"Hmph, there's no such thing as invincibility…"

No matter how strong a Dante's abilities, no one was undefeatable. There was always a way, if you only knew how to find and capitalize on it.

"Hraaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaarh!"

That cry, like a beast roaring, came flying toward him.

“Take this!” Lester dropped back, rotating his body as he again swung the Leo with all his strength.

The weapon’s blade, capable of shearing through its target with ease, made direct contact with the Knight’s left arm—and yet, instead of sending the limb flying as Lester had expected, his weapon came to a sudden halt with a force he had never before experienced. His opponent hadn’t bothered to avoid his attack—he had simply *stopped* it.

“Tch…!”

Lester attempted to fall back to escape the reach of the oncoming sword—but the tip tore a shallow cut in his arm, causing blood to spatter across the ground. Fortunately, the wound wasn’t deep.

He’s completely different now, everything down to his swordsmanship and movements, and his speed, too… His fighting style might be a bit rough, but he knows what he’s doing. Not that I can’t handle him, though…

The old Lester probably wouldn’t have had the skills to withstand the Knight, but Xinglou hadn’t given him her highest ranking at the Liangshan for nothing. At the very least, he wasn’t about to let his opponent get the better of him in close combat.

The problem was that his own attacks didn’t seem to affect his opponent at all. He knew that the Black Knight’s defenses were strong, given that Amphisbaena had been unable to land a successful blow during her match against him, but he hadn’t expected him to be this good. Far from being thrown across the stage, his body refused to move so much as an inch. Lester clearly had the stronger physique—he was confident that his physical strength was the highest among the entrants still remaining in the tournament—and his Bardiche-Leo was specially designed to maximize his attack power. No matter how robust that glimmering black suit of armor might be, the shock of the impact should have reached through it.

The only possible explanation was that the suit of armor had completely cut its wearer off from everything around him.

In that case, I’ll just have to keep looking for an opening…

If his foe’s school crest were visible, he could try aiming for that, but it, too, was totally encased.

“Grrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrah!”

As he blocked the Black Knight’s next downward assault with the Bardiche-Leo, he felt his arms growing numb from the force of the heavy impact—but he wasn’t going to let that affect his defense.

When he tried to fall back once more, his opponent, unwilling to let him go, stuck close, keeping up his assault—no doubt meaning to prevent him from escaping between each exchange of their weapons.

“*Tch!* Have you completely lost your head?! That’s a pretty dirty

way of fighting!"

"Hrrrraaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Normally, Lester would have been able to pull himself out of this kind of situation through brute force alone, but that wasn't working against this opponent. With no other option, he lashed out with the weapon grasped in his right hand while activating his second Bardiche-Leo in his left.

"Whoo! Neither contestant is giving any more ground! Just watch them cross blades! See how the Black Knight's sword is getting pushed back, how Kornephoros's huge battle-axes are literally groaning through the air?!"

Continuing to defend himself against his opponent's endless sequence of strikes with his two battle-axes, Lester, finally finding an opening, launched into a counterattack. With one weapon, he pushed back against his foe's blade as it came flying from overhead, before using the other to drive a powerful strike into his opponent's torso—and having made contact, sidestepped away and struck once more into his foe's back. Next, he bent backward to dodge the Black Knight's attempt to mow him down, the blow barely missing his head, before bringing both of his weapons down simultaneously to catch his foe in a pincer strike.

Even so, the Black Knight didn't stop. No matter how many blows Lester managed to land on him, his opponent didn't seem to suffer even the slightest bit of damage, nor was he beginning to falter.

"Hmm… If it keeps going like this, I think it's fair to say that Contestant MacPhail is the one at a disadvantage here. He's done well to dodge the Black Knight's blows this far, but at this rate…"

As Ren'ya observed, Lester was beginning to weaken, his opponent's black blade continuously biting at his arms and legs and leaving a myriad of shallow cuts. Even taking the contestants' respective strengths and weaknesses out of the equation, the rate of their attacks was simply too different. That was perhaps to be expected, seeing as the Black Knight didn't seem to be devoting any thought to defense.

"Guh…!"

If they kept exchanging blows like this, Lester knew his wounds would likely continue to get worse. He hadn't sustained a fatal injury just yet, but it was likely only a matter of time until he did.

I think I'm starting to get it…

The abilities of Dantes and Stregas depended on two factors.

The first was their amount of prana. If the Black Knight had a seemingly inexhaustible amount of prana, like Orphelia Landlufen, or Hilda Jane Rowlands, who had single-handedly destroyed the urm-manadite core of an Orga Lux earlier in the tournament, that might explain his extraordinary strength. But from what Lester could tell, his

opponent didn't exhibit that level of prana, and he didn't seem to be trying to conceal any vast reservoir of it, either. Indeed, the amount of prana Lester could sense in his foe was nothing if not average. And no matter how many personalities his opponent might have, he still only had one body, so that shouldn't have affected his total amount of prana, either.

That being the case, this so-called invincibility of his had to be based on the other factor—in other words, his strength of will. The abilities of all Dantes and Stregas were strongly affected by their user's willpower and mental state. If those twelve personalities had each poured their own thoughts and mental fortitude into the Black Knight, then it made sense that their shared ability might be so strong. That would also explain why his foe's prana seemed to be constantly fluctuating.

"Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaar!"

The Black Knight's attacks continued to grow more intense. At this rate, Lester realized, he would have to give up on countering and focus exclusively on defense. As capable as he might be at parrying his opponent, if he couldn't unleash any attacks of his own, he wouldn't be able to take him down—and of course, he wouldn't be able to score victory, either.

If he'd just let me fall back, I'd at least be able to shore up my battle posture…!

Lester mentally cursed his opponent—but at that moment, his foe's blade came crashing down, and he felt a hot impact course through his right thigh.

"Wha—?!"

From the Black Knight's left arm, a spearlike needle of black mud shot forth, piercing Lester's leg.

His foe's eyes at the back of his helmet narrowed in mirth.

What's with this guy…?! No, more importantly, was he waiting for me to try to counter…?!

Realizing that he had fallen into a trap, Lester moved to leap backward but was a second too late.

"Kreeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!"

With an earsplitting howl, countless thornlike needles erupted from the Black Knight's body and came flying straight toward him.

"Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Lester raised his arms to protect his school crest and vitals but, landing on the ground, found himself unable to support his weight and was forced to use the Bardiche-Leo grasped in his right hand to stop himself from collapsing. Blood was oozing from the wounds that crisscrossed his whole body, and his vision was growing blurred. The gash in his leg was particularly bad and would probably prevent him from dodging any more of his opponent's attacks.

The Black Knight continued to pursue him without mercy. If he managed to get close, he would no doubt end the match then and there. Lester had to find some way to stop him before that…

"Oh! Right!" he cried, before driving his free Bardiche-Leo directly

into the path of the oncoming Black Knight's feet.

"Gyah?!"

The weapon's glowing blade broke into the ground, causing the Black Knight to lose his balance and pitch forward. He might have been able to withstand Lester's attacks, but if he lost his footing, he would find himself in a bind. Rolling past him, the Black Knight quickly rose to his feet—but not before Lester could pour his prana into the Bardiche-Leo in his right hand.

"MacPhail is using Meteor Arts! That battle-ax was already huge, but he's making it swell to more than twice its original size! Will he be able to break through the Black Knight's invincibility?!"

"With the rate he's bleeding, he won't last long. He's probably going to risk an all-or-nothing attack."

Indeed. Now that it had come to this, there was nothing to be gained by drawing out the battle.

Now it was simply a question of which was stronger: the Black Knight's ability or Lester's power.

"Grrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrmm…!"

For the first time, the Black Knight seemed to show a hint of caution. All of a sudden, more of that blackish mudlike substance appeared out of nowhere, wrapping itself around his blade and causing it to grow longer. By the looks of it, his opponent, too, was willing to risk leaving himself open at close range in an attempt to bring the match to a close.

"…All right, let's see what you've got!"

"Kraaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

The Black Knight let out an earsplitting howl, lunging toward Lester at his fastest speed yet.

Lester held the Bardiche-Leo out horizontally, and bracing himself to strike—

"Burst Nemea!"

—he brought the weapon down with all his strength.

But as he had feared, it still didn't break through the Black Knight's armor—it didn't even seem to leave so much as a scratch.

"Guh…!"

And a moment later, the Black Knight's long sword dug deep into his flank.

"Whoa! I-is it over?!"

What the hell is that *supposed to mean…?*

Lester tightened his grip on the Bardiche-Leo, bringing it down on the Black Knight's chest once again, and again, and again.

"Gyahr?! Graaaaahhhhh?!"

His opponent cried out in confusion, but Lester didn't relent.

The Black Knight's ability was held together by the collective will

of twelve individuals. However, Lester had failed to detect any sense of passion in his opponent's style of combat. It was as if the Black Knight were fighting simply to defeat him—as if he were possessed of the most absolute sense of egoism imaginable. As far as the Black Knight was concerned, no one else was worth a second glance.

Lester wasn't about to let himself lose to someone like that.

"Look at me…! This is the face of someone who's willing to put their life on the line!"

If he could just break through the collective will of those twelve personalities…

He brought his ax down for a fourth, a fifth, and a sixth blow.

Out of nowhere came the sound of something cracking.

As it did, Xinglou's voice echoed in the back of his head:

"Good, Lester. Your power is indeed formidable—but by itself, it isn't enough to overcome your barriers. You still haven't mastered how to use that power. When you strike at your opponent with your ax, you strike at the whole—focus not on that, but on a single point. Concentrate your brute force on that one point. Once you can freely shift between targeting the whole and a single point, only then will you—"

"Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhh!"

Lester raised the Bardiche-Leo in his left hand—the one that he had been using to prop himself up—paying no heed to his opponent's oncoming blade as he drove home into his target.

"Gruh?!"

With that, the Black Knight's glistening armor burst open—and with an unnatural shriek, Lester's foe went flying across the stage.

The Black Knight rolled all the way into the center of the arena, until coming to a stop flat on his back, unmoving.

"…Incredible! Absolutely incredible! MacPhail's battle-ax has finally broken through the Black Knight's armor! What an exhilarating outcome!"

"…To think that such a powerful ability could be so completely demolished through sheer brute force…"

The mudlike substance covering the Black Knight began to ooze away, and then—

"Black Knight—Unconscious."

"End of battle! Winner: Lester MacPhail!"

Lester waited until the automated announcement had fully rung out before letting his body fall limp to the ground.

"Heh… Heh-heh…! I've done it…!"

With the cold earth pressing against his cheeks, he broke into a weak laugh as he slipped into unconsciousness.

*

“Haah… Haah…!”

“I doubt I need to tell you this, but you will only be able to use that technique once in a setting like the Festa. Be sure to do so wisely.”

They were in a boundless, infinite space.

Julis, her breath faint, was sitting across from Xinglou.

Xinglou, for her part, stood with arms folded, her clothes scorched dark here and there.

“But will you be able to master it before then…? There isn’t much time before the opening of the Lindvolus.”

“…You don’t need to worry about that. I’ll perfect it before then, I promise you. And afterward, I’ll wipe away that composure of yours, too.” So saying, Julis placed her hands on her knees and used her remaining strength to push herself to her feet.

“Hmm! You’re very confident for someone who’s already spent their energy and willpower.” Xinglou chuckled.

Fully aware that she couldn’t deny it, Julis merely glared back at her.

The *Queen of the Night*—a technique designed specifically for defeating Orphelia Landlufen, one that pushed her Strega abilities to their absolute limit. Julis still hadn’t managed to fully bring it under control, but she was confident she would be able to master it before too long. So that wasn’t a problem. No, what bothered her was the fact that she would only have one chance to use it.

The technique involved pushing her physical strength, her mental resolve, and her prana as far as they could go. And having used it, she wouldn’t be able to recover in just a day or two. Once she put it to use, she would be unlikely even to make it to her next match, let alone compete in it.

It would be fine if she could face Orphelia early on in the tournament, but she couldn’t bank on that hope. If she had to wait until the main tournament, she would likely come head-to-head with those Xinglou liked to say had overcome their barriers—people like Ayato, Xiaohui, and Sylvia. Before finally being paired with Orphelia, she had to be ready to face at least one of them, and possibly all three.

In that case…

“Ban’yuu Tenra, let me ask you something.”

“And what would that be?”

“Without the *Queen of the Night*…would I stand a chance of defeating them?” Julis asked, her expression deathly serious.

Xinglou, however, brushed aside her student’s graveness with a light chuckle: “Hmm, I think not.”

"…I see. But… No, it's fine. I thought as much," Julis replied, her shoulders slumping.

She had always known that would be the case.

That was why she had prepared such an excessive double-edged weapon.

"Oh-ho! Come now, I meant that in jest. With you, there's always a chance."

"Huh?! Really?!" Julis suddenly looked up, grasping Xinglou by the shoulder.

"As I told you before, you've already maximized your potential. There's nowhere else for you to go. Your physical qualities and battle techniques are certainly beyond proficient, but they don't compare to those of competitors who have overcome their barriers. Your best hope for attempting to compete with them lies in your control over your prana—although you still won't be a good match. You're likely to lose ten out of ten matches, a hundred out of a hundred—and win, perhaps, one out of a thousand."

"…I thought so."

"But then you went and showed off that new technique of yours," Xinglou continued with a smile. "Do you understand what I'm saying? You have talent. Talent that I failed to recognize."

"No, I mean, I'm talking about my chances if I *don't* use the *Queen of the Night*—"

"Tsk, tsk… You still don't understand. Your talent lies in your ability to produce new possibilities. You are a first-class Strega. And what lies behind that? Your amount of prana? Your firepower? No. Your strength as a Strega lies precisely in your diverse abilities. And behind those abilities, your skill at imagining them."

"My skill at imagining them…?"

Certainly, Julis herself was well aware of the versatility of her abilities, and yet…

"But will that be enough to overcome the distance between them and me?"

"Of course not."

Julis was left stunned by the bluntness of Xinglou's answer. "Why would you…" She stopped there, glaring.

"That's why I said you have a chance," Xinglou continued calmly. "That doesn't mean you will be able to match them. It's precisely *because* you can't match them that you've developed as many techniques as you have, no? And if you keep developing your skill to imagine things…if you reach out with all your might, you very well may succeed in touching the edge of that barrier of yours. And if you keep going, your odds might even come close to one in a hundred."

"If I keep developing my imagination…"

Finally, Julis understood what Xinglou was trying to tell her.

"However, that is something that I cannot train. You must forge it yourself, develop it, and extend it, building upon what you already have, piece by piece. It will not be easy. Indeed, it is something that you can only do for yourself."

"Hmph, that's fine with me."

She would do whatever she had to.

In any case, she was already determined to do the impossible.

"I'll win, no matter who I'm up against. I have to!" she murmured, as if trying to convince herself.

Several months had passed since this meeting, and now…

"Allll right! Making her way through the east gate is Seidoukan Academy's number five, the champion of both the Phoenix and Gryps, aiming, along with Contestant Ayato Amagiri, to achieve this tournament's second-ever Grand Slam…the Witch of Resplendent Flames, the Glühen Rose, Julis-Alexia von Riessfeld!"

The somewhat languid voice belonged to the announcer, ABC's Domitila Cruz Fanoris, a former student of Le Wolfe Black Institute.

"As a Strega, she's at the top of her class, and she can stand shoulder to shoulder with Sigrdrífa, Contestant Sylvia Lyyneheym. There's no mistaking that long-range combat is her specialty, but her masterful control over her Rect Lux should allow her to put up a good fight at close and medium ranges, too. You might even say she's the most well-rounded contestant still standing."

The commentator, Maeve Kelly, a former student of Saint Gallardworth Academy, normally worked for Asterisk's government administration. She frequently provided commentary at the Phoenix, Gryps, and Lindvolus—so much so that she was often jokingly referred to as the Festa's jack-of-all-trades.

Well, not that I'm bothered by having a serious commentary or anything, but still…

As Julis made her way through the gate and down the bridge leading onto the stage, she was surprised that she would even pay attention to commentary. Whether she was feeling relaxed or on edge, she didn't know.

She leaped down onto the stage, took a deep breath as she eyed the warrior standing across from her, and called out: "It's been a while, Hagun Seikun. I don't think we've come face-to-face since the Gryps. I heard you took a leave of absence to focus on your training?"

"Indeed. It was a worthwhile journey. You will see the results for yourself, Glühen Rose."

"…I think you've already demonstrated them well enough," Julis

said with a wry smile.

Xiaohui had finished each of his matches in the preliminaries in a single blow. Even his fourth-round match against Seidoukan's number six, Azumachi Ibara, had been an extremely one-sided affair.

Ibara had maintained his position as one of Seidoukan's Page Ones for a long time—although strictly speaking, the only real change that had taken place in the rankings over the past year was Lester, who had fallen to number eleven after failing to enter a sufficient number of matches—and no one in their right mind would question his level of ability. He was terribly proficient in *aiki juujutsu*, the first fighting style to be associated specifically with Genestella. It was said that he could destroy his opponent's joints with barely one touch. The destructive potential of his throwing techniques, boosted by his considerable prana, were nothing to make light of, either. Julis knew also that he had once viewed Kirin as a sort of kindred spirit due to the fact that she, like him, didn't rely on any specialized abilities in combat—but since she had received her Orga Lux, he seemed to have become highly critical of her.

Xiaohui, however, had broken through those techniques of his single-handedly and had finished their match with a single strike to his abdomen. Compared to Ibara, Julis's present opponent was on a whole other plane of existence.

"I've heard that my master has been training you, too, Glühen Rose."

"Yeah. Her thirst for battle has been a great help."

"Hah… My master knows no limits… Or rather, she'll keep pushing you right up to the very end," Xiaohui replied, his stern expression loosening somewhat.

"…You've changed, Hagun Seikun."

While Julis's team had fought against Xiaohui's during the Gryps, she had never exchanged blows with him directly. Still, his aura seemed to have softened since she had seen him last time—or perhaps he was simply allowing himself to show a more human side.

"Is that so…? I wouldn't know one way or another…but the Keen-Edged Tempest did say something like that the other day. I suppose it must be true."

"Kirin did…?"

The statement left Julis feeling somewhat uneasy, but the match was about to get under way.

She removed the body of her Rect Lux from the holder at her waist, activating it. Xiaohui, on the other hand, showed no sign of readying any weapons. He had used a staff during the Gryps, but given that he had fought empty-handed throughout the Lindvolus thus far, his battle style looked to have changed as well.

“It doesn’t matter. Anyway, I don’t intend to surrender this match to you. No matter how strong you are.”

“…Just what I was hoping, Glühen Rose.”

The two of them exchanged unyielding looks for a long moment, before heading toward their respective starting positions.

“Round 5, Match 4—begin!”

“Pò!”

No sooner did the automated voice ring out than the center of the stage was engulfed in a sudden explosion.

The shock gouged a long gash through the ground and sent cracks running in every direction.

It was no more than an earth-shattering leg pound, but likely only a handful of the nearly one hundred thousand spectators would have realized that—and it was unlikely that any of them would have been able to follow Xiaohui’s every movement. Julis couldn’t help but wonder how many of those watching remotely—and indeed, how many ranked students from the other schools—had been able to do so.

Out of the cloud of dust emerged her opponent, fists ready.

“I unleashed my full power in that first shot…but it seems you were able to evade it.”

“I don’t mind the praise, but this is still just— Ugh!”

Julis gripped her hanging right arm, doing the best she could to endure the pain. Given how it was swelling, it was probably broken.

As far as attacks went, Xiaohui’s were incredibly straightforward—he had simply scored a strike on her, albeit not perfectly. That was all—but if he had managed to score a direct hit, the match would undoubtedly have been over then and there.

Still…while it was barely in the nick of time, I did *dodge it. And if Xiaohui was telling the truth, he put everything he had into that.*

In that case, there was still hope.

“Oh dear… The match has only just begun, but Contestant Wu has already struck a particularly destructive blow. Contestant Riessfeld looks to have dodged a direct hit, but she’s sustained considerable damage. The match might be over before we know it…”

“I wouldn’t necessarily say that. Wu certainly has a significant advantage with that raw power of his, but the fact that Riessfeld was able to pull through it at all is proof of her abilities and skill.”

“Meaning…?”

“Take a look at her footing.”

Following Maeve’s comment, Julis felt the weight of the crowd’s gaze on her feet.

Indeed, countless small, palm-sized wings of flame had emerged

from her ankles, fluttering back and forth.

"I see… That must be an acceleration ability," Xiaohui murmured as he saw them for himself.

"It's practically impossible for someone like me to pull off a feat like your Tenka Musou in a short space of time—but this is much more manageable."

Julis's technique was called the *Strelitzia Minor*—a limited application of her *Strelitzia* flight ability. While the *Strelitzia* ability could certainly build up speed, it took considerable time to do so and didn't allow for tight turns or adjustments. The *Strelitzia Minor* was designed specifically to overcome those shortcomings while consuming very little prana.

"Interesting!" Xiaohui exclaimed as he launched into a second attack. In less than a second, he had emerged from the crater at the epicenter of his first attack and circled around to her left-hand side, plunging his right fist toward her.

"Guh…!"

Julis raised the six units of her Rect Lux to defend herself against the oncoming blow, but her opponent sent them all flying with one strike—then, pushing through the now-cleared space in front of him, he aimed for her school crest.

Julis, however, was a second faster, using her winged feet to fall back and put as much distance between herself and her opponent as she could. After all, it would mean certain defeat to try to face Xiaohui in close combat.

Yes… It shouldn't be impossible to keep dodging these kinds of attacks.

In the back of her mind, she recalled something Xinglou had said to her sometime prior: *"Julis. Just what do you think it is that is so different between those who have overcome their boundaries and those who haven't, like yourself…? Physical ability? Combat techniques? No, no, no. Those are mere trivialities. The real difference between you and them lies in your reaction speed. The world in which they fight moves at a different pace. Which means that you will be completely helpless against them. And there is only so far you can go, training your reaction speed by yourself. You need to experience that world firsthand. So how about it? Do you understand what I'm telling you? Why the training that we do here at the Liangshan resembles actual combat?"*

Right now, Julis had a clear sense of what Xinglou had meant.

It was difficult to put into words, but it was thanks to sparring with Xinglou that she had been able to respond to Xiaohui's attacks, just as it was thanks to her that she had been able to drag herself to the edge of this world beyond barriers. In other words, her body knew how to react to a speed even greater than Xiaohui's.

Regardless, that didn't change the fact that she was completely on

the defensive against her opponent's overwhelming power. The best she could hope to do was keep falling back while attacking from a distance. To that end, she stabbed the Nova Spina into the ground, pushing it in with her left hand and summoning a huge magic circle atop the stage.

"Burst into bloom—*Grevillea!*"

As she cried out, numerous pillars of flame, each more than ten meters in height, suddenly erupted around her opponent. Then, with a wave of her left hand, those columns of fire began to slide across the earth, heading straight for Xiaohui.

"…I saw you use this technique at the Gryps, Glühen Rose," he said softly, scattering the oncoming pillars of flame with a single backhand strike.

"Wha—?!"

She hadn't expected this.

"Shì!"

Xiaohui swung his hand horizontally like a blade, causing a powerful gale to whip across the stage, extinguishing each of the remaining columns simultaneously.

"…"

"…"

Julis was left speechless.

And it wasn't just her—Maeve Kelly and the audience were also left in eerie silence.

"Um, er… What was that…?" stammered Domitila.

"Wu probably just… No, he did *do it… The power of his last attack completely destroyed Riessfeld's ability…"*

"Guh…! Why are you always so over-the-top?!"

She had hoped he would at least need to use a spell charm to avoid it, but instead he had just brushed it aside empty-handed, leaving her wondering what on earth she was supposed to try next.

No…hold on… It only lasted a second, but there was something going on with the prana around his fist…

She was struck by a strange, discomforting feeling. It was prana, and yet at the same time, it wasn't…

She stopped herself there, quickly turning her attention back to the here and now. If she was going to stand a chance of pulling through, she couldn't afford to let down her guard.

"Burst into bloom—*Ixora Chinensis!*"

With a swing of the Nova Spina, she summoned up dozens of fist-sized balls of fire.

"Go!"

With that command, the balls of fire swept toward their target like a barrage of bulletlike hornets, flying toward him at irregular speeds

and trajectories. With their sheer number, coupled with the randomness of their movements, evading them wouldn't be easy.

"Hmm…"

Xiaohui broke into a quizzical frown but, with a sweep of his right hand, began to brush them away. As he did so, they erupted into a small explosion—but from the very beginning, they hadn't been particularly powerful.

That's it…!

At that moment, Julis brought the remaining balls of fire crashing toward the point of impact.

"Ngh…!"

Dancing through the air, they slammed into Xiaohui's fist one after the other, each one adding to the conflagration. Individually, they didn't possess much power—but with this many of them, there was no way he would be able to escape unscathed. At the very least, they would tie him down long enough for her to begin her next move.

"Burst into bloom—*Gaillardia!*"

As she raised the Nova Spina into the air, a circle of fire easily ten times the size of one of her Livingstone Daisies emerged overhead. She sent it spinning at incredible speed toward her opponent, when—

"I don't think so!" Xiaohui called out, somehow managing to hold it back with his left hand.

"Impossible!"

No matter how incredible he was, no matter how much his strength transcended the limits of other Genestella, withstanding a technique of that magnitude should have required a practically inexhaustible amount of prana, like that which only Orphelia possessed.

"Zhan!"

"Wha—?!"

But shockingly, Xiaohui then used the same right hand that had been engulfed by Julis's *Ixora Chinensis* technique to cut right through the huge burning disc.

That's it! The quality of the prana in his left and right hands is different…! But how is that—

"Got you!"

"Augh!"

Xiaohui took advantage of her momentary lapse of focus to draw uncomfortably close—and then, with a flash of his right hand, cut straight through her school crest…

Or so it appeared.

"Huh?!"

Julis's figure shimmered in the air, before disappearing entirely. For the first time, her opponent's expression was one of surprise.

Oncidium Shirley.

Like the *seisenjutsu* techniques used by the Li twins that had once so flustered her, this was an illusion technique—one she had used to circle around her opponent.

And then—

"Bloom—*Gomphrena!*"

She activated her trap.

"—!"

Petals of flame erupted from under Xiaohui's feet, enveloping him completely. The shape and deep-red color of those petals were modeled on the globe amaranth. Unlike her previous techniques, it did not end in an explosion but rather confined its target to the middle of that great flower, dealing continued damage through powerful waves of heat.

And yet—

"I see. Impressive," came a voice echoing from within that cage.

"Come on now, don't tell me…"

With a cross-shaped flash of light, the petals holding him in split open—and then, emerging slowly from within, was Xiaohui. He looked largely uninjured, though his skin was drenched in sweat.

"All that, and all it did was make you break out into a sweat…?"

"…Not at all. You took me by surprise there, to be honest. Your capacity to apply and imagine each of your abilities is outstanding. Worthy of admiration, even," Xiaohui replied.

There was no mistaking it—his right arm was clad in a highly unusual type of prana.

"What's impressive is that prana of ours. Just what is that?" she demanded.

"Al-Najmiya." Xiaohui's response was simple. "A means of improving the quality of one's prana."

"…I thought so."

She had never before heard of such a thing, but seeing him do it right in front of her eyes, she could not doubt the truth behind those words.

"Compared to the one who taught me, what I have achieved is mere child's play. However, using it to adjust my prana for defense, it allows me to withstand your abilities—and adjusting for offense, it lets me go head-to-head with an Orga Lux unarmed." Xiaohui paused there, spreading his feet wide and lowering his center of gravity as he readied himself to launch yet another attack. "And…combining this Al-Najmiya with the martial arts my master has trained me in, I, Xiaohui Wu, have developed my own fighting style!"

"Well now, this is a surprise…"

Madiath, watching Julis's and Xiaohui's match through an air-window in his special viewing lounge next to the Executive Committee headquarters, found himself startling but soon regained his composure. After all, numerous top executives from each of the Integrated Enterprise Foundations were also present in the same room. It wasn't a particularly unusual remark, but it was best to refrain from saying anything careless here.

He cast a glance around the room, but nobody seemed to be paying him any attention.

However… It's hard to say for sure, but that technique has come remarkably close to my own domain. The Ban'yuu Tenra's top disciple truly is possessed of exceptional wit.

Thanks to the effects of his savage fighting style, Madiath could shift his prana into a particularly dense state in combat. That was only achievable thanks to his fierce, intense force of will and was the result of long years of cultivation. In fact, he had heard of cases similar to his own—people who were able to adjust their prana through force of will or emotion—but most were unable to demonstrate or reproduce that ability when directly called upon. Indeed, at first, even Madiath himself hadn't recognized what he was doing.

And so, the obvious question came bubbling up inside him: *Xiaohui Wu…just where did you pick up that technique?*

It wouldn't have been difficult to accept if the Ban'yuu Tenra herself had taught it to him. Anyone who had lived for as long as she had was bound to pick up more than a few inexplicable skills.

However, neither the first- nor the second-generation Ban'yuu Tenra had ever publicly demonstrated such an ability herself. It wasn't impossible that she regarded it as the most hidden of hidden techniques, but then why would she divulge it now, and to a disciple, no less? The more likely scenario was that Xiaohui had learned it from someone else. After all, he clearly hadn't developed it himself.

And of course, he had spent the past year training away from Asterisk.

The world must be a bigger place than I thought…

Surprised that he had been so struck with wonder, he turned his gaze back to the match.

In any event, Riessfeld isn't going to have an easy time of it…

"A-amazing! Elder Disciple is overwhelming!"

Hufeng rose to his feet in Jie Long Seventh Institute's special viewing lounge at the Capella Dome, clenching his fists in excitement.

He had already heard about Xiaohui's newfound ability to manipulate his prana, but since it hadn't been necessary during the preliminaries, this was the first time he was seeing it for himself.

“His martial arts have improved as well… That power is incredible… Well, on behalf of the Water sect, I’m a little disappointed that his use of *seisenjutsu* has decreased, but still…”

Cecily was clearly similarly struck by amazement.

It was certainly true that Xiaohui had used a greater proportion of *seisenjutsu* in the past to supplement his close-combat skills. In temperament, though, he had always been more of a martial artist than a *daoshi*. That inclination, it seemed, had only increased now that he had returned from his journey.

Compared to his present level of skill, however, those past techniques were little more than trifles.

“He’ll be able to face down even Erenshkigal! Don’t you think so, Master?” Hufeng asked.

When he turned to her, however, she looked unusually sullen.

“Master…?” he repeated uncertainly, stooping down and peering at her face.

“—!”

“Heh-heh… Ha-ha… Ha-ha-ha-ha! Let’s see what you can do, you two…! Good, good…!”

Xinglou’s eyes were burning with intensity, her countenance consumed by a ferocious grin.

“Uh…Master? Please don’t get angry at me for saying this, but please, I hope you’re not planning to barge in there…?”

Cecily, sweat breaking out on her forehead, attempted to mollify their master—but by the looks of it, Xinglou wasn’t listening.

No matter how difficult their master could be, she wouldn’t do anything too extreme…

Or so Hufeng hoped.

“…”

He exchanged a wordless glance with Cecily, the two of them nodding to indicate that they were both ready to move quickly should it prove necessary—although if Xinglou really had worked herself up as much as she appeared to have, it was unlikely that anything they could do would be able to stop her.

“Burst into bloom—*Honeysuckle!*”

Julis fluttered through the air with the help of two radiant, burning wings. Innumerable magic circles opened up beneath her, sending lances of flame flying into the air like rockets.

Xiaohui, however, was using spell charms that he had placed all over the stage to leap around her techniques. Not only was he dodging each of her attacks, but he was also drawing ever closer to her. His movements, too, went far beyond the norm. He wasn’t exactly flying through the air, as she was, but rather seemed to be racing across the

ground. That said, what he was doing was by no means inferior to Zhao Hufeng's Orga Lux, the Tongtianzu.

"Ugh! How can he be this fast…?!"

Unless she could take him by surprise, Julis knew, it wouldn't be easy for her to land another hit on her opponent. On top of that, given the way he was controlling his prana, it would be even more difficult for her to do any damage.

"Jí jí rú lǜ lìng, chì!"

Julis fell back, trying to escape, when Xiaohui hurled a purple thundercloud of spell charms her way.

"Guh…!"

With her escape route blocked, Julis quickly changed her trajectory, using her Rect Lux to tear through the nearest spells to rob her opponent of his footholds. At the very least, this would force him to take a different route before reaching her.

"Burst into bloom—*Impatiens!*"

Julis launched into her next attack, summoning up another magic circle behind her opponent. From the circle emerged a huge flock of fiery creatures, bearing down on him. The move was intended to kill three birds with one stone, as in addition to laying into an attack, they also served to block Xiaohui's vision and burn away his charms.

"Impressive, Glühen Rose! However— *Bào!*"

Just as Xiaohui began to advance toward his spells, his feet were consumed by a fresh explosion.

"What…?!"

The force of the blast was enough to send him breaking through the dense flock, heading right for Julis.

"Ah! Burst into bloom—*Anthurium Multifluus!*"

She hurried to summon up a wall of shields to defend herself, but Xiaohui used his momentum to kick his way right through them, before scoring a direct hit on her chest.

"Gah…!"

She could feel her bones creaking under the pressure as she was thrown straight into the ground like a falling meteor. For a second, she found herself unable to breathe—and during that moment, her wings of fire were suddenly extinguished. In all likelihood, she had probably broken two or three ribs.

Xiaohui, landing in front of her, moved to deal the final blow—but as he did so, Julis, enduring the pain of her injuries, recalled the units of her Rect Lux to hold him back.

"Now! Burst into bloom—*Erythrina!*"

Staggering to her feet, her voice ragged, she summoned up close to a dozen blades of burning flame, sending them careening toward her opponent. Factoring in the units of her Rect Lux, the attack

involved close to twenty individual weapons.

"Shì!"

Xiaohui, however, dispersed them all with a single swing of his arm. Judging by his actions so far, unless she resorted to a particularly large-scale technique, she wouldn't even be able to so much as hold him back.

Nonetheless, she used the brief window of opportunity she had wrested from him to employ her *Strelitzia Minor* technique once more, sliding backward across the stage in retreat.

"This is impressive. You can't afford to take your eyes away from this contest of offense and defense for even a moment."

"Contestant Wu might be completely on the offense here, but Contestant Riessfeld is putting up a hell of a fight—probably right up to the bitter end."

"Haah… Haah…!"

Julis raced to steady her breathing as she made a mental calculation of her remaining prana.

Damn it…! I don't have much left…!

She had been using her abilities extensively throughout the match. If not for that, she wouldn't have stood a chance of evading Xiaohui's attacks—but it did mean that she would inevitably deplete her prana sooner rather than later. On top of that, she had broken her arm and several ribs, not to mention received countless blows and lacerations. It wasn't just her prana that was in trouble—at this rate, she risked falling victim to physical exhaustion, too.

Her opponent, on the other hand, was still unscathed.

"Very impressive, Glühen Rose. I looked through your data prior to the match, but this is my first time seeing your techniques apart from your shields of fire."

Xiaohui's voice was filled with unbridled admiration. He undoubtedly meant every word he said.

"…I can't afford to use a known technique against someone like you, so I have no choice but to exhaust my new ones."

"Oh? How many do you have left?"

"What makes you think I'd tell you that?"

"Hah, indeed. It was a foolish question. Forgive me." Xiaohui flashed her a wry smile as he corrected his fighting posture. "I'll find out for myself!"

And with that, he leaped straight for her.

The truth of the matter was that *she had already exhausted her stock of new moves*.

With the exception of the traps she had already laid, she had no other techniques left that she could be sure that her opponent had never seen before. Of course, given the rich variety of her techniques,

there were undoubtedly countless permutations and combinations she could attempt. But that, she knew, wouldn't be enough. Her situation was growing more dire by the second.

Given that he had successfully evaded and defended against every single one of her moves thus far, if she tried one he already knew, it would only give him another opportunity to demonstrate his own strength. After all, it was chiefly because she was responding to his overwhelming power with unseen skills that she had held out so far. Without them, he would corner her in an instant.

What, then, was she supposed to do?

"Pò!"

"Ugh…!"

Xiaohui pushed through the six units of her Rect Lux as he came toward her.

Julis reflexively moved to evade, knowing instinctively that even if she managed to dodge his first strike, the second would be unavoidable.

But at that moment, a scene from the distant past rose before her.

The greenhouse at the orphanage in Lieseltania. A young girl wearing a warm, gentle smile—and beside her, covered in mud and in clear distress, herself. Surrounding them, an armada of flowers in every color imaginable stood guard. Beneath their feet as they ran together toward the nearby plain, a sea of green. The small faces of cute buds peeking out from amid the verdure. The girl happily pointing at one thing or another in the local flower shop, or explaining something she had found in an old encyclopedia. And the name of that girl…

…*Orphelia!*

As she twisted her body, shrinking from Xiaohui's outstretched palm, Julis picked a motif from deep in her mind, constructed a mental picture, worked out the details, and let her prana flow.

"Bloom…"

At the exact same moment, she lifted the Nova Spina into the air.

"Spiranthes!"

"Wha—?!"

As the ability took form, Xiaohui drove his elbow into the pit of her stomach.

"Gah…!"

She was thrown backward, blood spewing from her mouth—but in the meantime, six cones of rotating flame had fallen upon her opponent.

"Ngh…!"

Using both arms, Xiaohui was able to brush four of them aside, but the remaining two slipped through his defenses, scoring direct hits

on his abdomen and right leg.

The burning drills picked up speed, hoping to cut through their target's defensive prana—but they still weren't powerful enough.

"Pēn!"

Xiaohui pounded the ground once more, easily extinguishing the last of the fiery cones.

"Argh…! I suppose they weren't detailed enough…"

Julis rose to her feet, wiping the blood from the corners of her lips with the back of her hand.

Spiranthes. A perennial of the orchid family, possessing a tall, narrow stem surrounded by a helix of small, pale-pink flowers.

"Glühen Rose, this time—"

But before he could finish what he was saying, Xiaohui's eyes opened wide in shock.

"Now then…"

Julis was undeniably growing weak, but she flashed him a defiant grin.

It went without saying, but Xiaohui must have realized it as well—*she had created that last ability on the spot.*

Right. If she had exhausted her inventory of techniques, she would just have to create new ones. It was as simple as that.

"…Heh, ha-ha-ha-ha! Astounding, Glühen Rose!" Xiaohui exclaimed, breaking into laughter.

"You look like you're having a good time…Hagun Seikun."

He seemed like a completely different person than the Xiaohui she had met during the Gryps.

Almost like—

"Almost like the Ban'yuu Tenra."

At Julis's remark, Xiaohui appeared stunned for a split second but quickly nodded back to her in joy. "There can be no higher praise."

And with that, he raised his fists once more, preparing to resume his attack.

Julis, on the other hand, was already close to her limit just keeping herself upright. Her vision had grown hazy, and every single muscle in her body seemed to be screaming in agony.

And yet, in spite of that, her thoughts were remarkably calm.

Xiaohui was currently standing in the exact same position she herself had occupied just a moment prior.

And she had already finished laying her trap.

"Bloom—*Phlox Subulata!*"

"Huh?!"

At that instant, a blanket of small, sweet blossoms of flame erupted beneath his feet, completely consuming the ground around him for dozens of meters in every possible direction. Naturally, the

earth beneath Julis's feet was also consumed by those flames, but as she was able to resist her own abilities, that didn't pose a problem.

"Tch!"

Xiaohui leaped into the air, trying to avoid using the spell charms still dotted around the stage—but Julis had expected this as well. She wasn't about to let him escape that way again.

"Bloom—*Dicentra!*"

As she activated the ability, a torrent of short blades of fire appeared above her opponent's head.

"Two trap abilities…! I already know this one, though!" Xiaohui called out as the blades came flying toward him.

The combination of techniques wasn't radically different from one she had employed during the Phoenix, so it was little wonder that Xiaohui had been anticipating something like this. Indeed, he managed to dodge the oncoming maelstrom without letting so much as a single projectile reach him, leaping through the air from one foothold to the next, before landing outside the range of the Phlox Subulata.

"Ah, I thought you would be expecting it."

Which was precisely why she had already launched into her next strike.

"Wha—?!"

The next moment, the units of her Rect Lux closed in around him—and, channeling her prana through those units, she immediately laid another trap. In other words, it was a three-tiered combination of techniques.

"Bloom—"

This was another technique she had put together on the spur of the moment. A sharp pain was tearing through the back of her chest, but right now she had no choice but to grit her teeth.

"Lycoris Radiata!"

As she pierced the ground in front of her with the Nova Spina, an uncanny conflagration shaped like a red spider lily erupted beneath Xiaohui's feet.

"You'll need to do better than that!"

With a bright flash, the offensive prana in Xiaohui's right arm tore through the Lycoris Radiata, reducing it to a cloud of red embers. His Al-Najmiya technique was truly formidable.

And yet—

"*Guh…!* Wh-what's happening…?!"

For the first time during the whole match, Xiaohui shuddered, his face writhing in pain.

"Sorry about this…but I had no choice. I need to win this match."

The *Lycoris radiata*, the red spider lily, was a famously toxic plant.

When Julis had imagined her technique, it wasn't just its shape that she had in mind, but that quality. After all, a Strega's abilities depended on her strength of will and her skill at imaging her various moves, so as long as she made the motif as strong as possible, it shouldn't have been impossible to do what she just had.

That was what she believed.

I wonder if this brings me closer to where you are, Orphelia? But no… this was just a deceit, I suppose…

Julis cast aside her sentimentality, readying the Nova Spina.

"Let's finish this, Hagun Seikun."

"Poison… I see… It looks like I underestimated you…"

Judging by his tone of voice, Xiaohui sounded like he was in considerable pain. The poison of the red spider lily may have paled in comparison to that of Orphelia or the Serpent Blade Ororomunt, but it was enough to leave the defenseless Xiaohui short of breath. That meant his ability to focus his prana was in all likelihood severely impaired.

Or at least, it should have been.

"Ha…ha-ha-ha-ha! Don't underestimate me, either, Glühen Rose! I am Xiaohui Wu! Jie Long Seventh Institute's number two, the Celestial Warrior, and the Ban'yuu Tenra Xinglou Fan's highest disciple!"

Xiaohui pressed his hands against his knees as he rose to his feet, his gaze burning with passion.

"What…?!" Julis exclaimed.

His right hand swung down, tearing through the *Phlox subulata* that coated the ground and forging a path leading straight for her.

"I'm coming for you…!" he cried as he began to soar down the path.

"*Ngh…!* Come on…!" Julis answered, swinging the Nova Spina to meet him.

She concentrated what prana she had left, imagined her next move—and let it loose.

"Burst into bloom—*Nerium Oleander*!"

A giant double-flowered blossom spread open beneath her opponent, swallowing him whole and erupting in a powerful explosion.

And yet, though his uniform was left scorched in a few places, and though he had sustained a few burns, he emerged straight through the other side, still flying toward her.

"Raaaaaaaaaaaaahh!"

With a tremendous roar, he slammed the palm of his hand straight into her chest.

"Ugh!"

The tremendous force of the shock tore right through Julis's body,

pushing her to the edge of unconsciousness for a split second.

"G-gurhf!"

She was only able to withstand that blow—insofar as she had withstood it—thanks to the fact that Xiaohui was still reeling from the effects of her poison.

The double-flowered blossom he had broken through was an oleander. It, too, was poisonous, and it should have inflicted some amount of damage on him.

But even so, Xiaohui's movements were still a level above her own. He quickly spun around, aiming a roundhouse kick straight for the right side of her head.

"Pò!"

"Guh…!"

She managed, albeit barely, to escape the full thrust of that attack, but it nonetheless left a trail of blood dripping down her head, rendering her barely able to see through her right eye. Her strength leaving her, she collapsed to the ground, unable even to raise her left arm to protect her school crest.

Her consciousness was fading, but she knew that Xiaohui's right fist was still coming straight for her.

It would only take him a second to smash through her badge.

But at that moment, a simple handkerchief fluttering through the air landed softly on her head, embroidered in one corner with a rough approximation of a garland.

"You know, Julis, your hair is such a beautiful color. Almost like a—"

At the sound of that voice echoing softly in her heart, Julis's eyes snapped wide open.

"Burst…into…bloom—*Rose Odysseia…!*"

"Ah?!"

A small rose appeared between her and her opponent, spreading its bright-red petals and opening up into a powerful explosion.

That hellfire wrapped itself around Xiaohui, searing through his school crest—just as, at almost precisely the same moment, his fist tore through hers.

"Xiaohui Wu—crest broken."

"Julis-Alexia von Riessfeld—crest broken."

The two automated voices echoed on top of one another.

However, in the Festa, there was no such thing as a tie. Especially when it came to the destruction of one's school crest, even a fraction of a second could make all the difference.

“End of battle! Winner: Julis-Alexia von Riessfeld!”

As the announcement resounded throughout the stadium, both Julis and Xiaohui collapsed flat on their backs, their breathing ragged. Julis, for her part, didn’t even have enough strength left to push herself up.

“I-it’s over! Contestant Riessfeld has overcome one of the fiercest contestants in living memory to snatch victory from the claws of defeat!”

“It would be easy to put Contestant Riessfeld’s victory here down to her refusal to surrender, her dogged persistence right up to the very end, but I think the way she kept pushing through the huge difference in raw power between herself and Contestant Wu was the key factor here.”

“Ha-ha! You mean her indomitable spirit?”

Despite their words of praise, the voices of the announcer and commentator barely reached Julis.

If she were to let her mind wander, she knew, she would in all likelihood lose consciousness.

“I prepared these new techniques hoping to secure a comeback… but I see now that it isn’t just the Keen-Edged Tempest—I keep losing to all of you.”

Xiaohui, wearing a bitter smile, approached Julis’s side. The effects of her two poisonous techniques should still have been taking their toll, but he was evidently still able to walk. That alone was proof of the huge gulf between them.

“Stop complaining. I was just lucky,” Julis returned, her voice hoarse.

There was no mistaking that Kirin’s victory over Xiaohui during the Gryps had been based on merit.

The same couldn’t be said about this match. For Julis, in an extraordinary stroke of luck, the pieces had just happened to fit together perfectly. It was unfair to Kirin to put the two of them on the same level.

“I wonder… But if that’s what the winner believes, then I have no right to object. Still, being the vanquished here, let me say this: I shall repay this debt one day,” he said, breaking into a broad smile.

“…You really have changed, Hagun Seikun… No, Xiaohui Wu.”

“Well, my score with Kirin Toudou comes first, but after that… I’ll be looking forward to our next encounter, Julis-Alexia von Riessfeld.”

It was her turn to flash him a wry grin. “No, I think I’ll refrain from ever fighting you again.”

CHAPTER 4
ROUND FIVE III

"Aha! It's been a while! Who would have thought I'd bump into you again here like this?" the young girl called, her hair tied in two brilliant blond ponytails, as she pointed to Saya with her arm outstretched. This was Violet Weinberg.

"…" Saya merely stared back at her for a long moment, tilting her head in confusion, before finally speaking: "Have we met somewhere?"

"Ah?! Wha—?! H-how can you…?! Are you serious?! It's me! Violet!" she exclaimed, pointing at her own face as she approached.

"Hmm…" Saya crossed her arms, tilting her head this time to the other side—but she still couldn't remember having met her opponent before. "Sorry… Who are you, again?"

"Augh!"

At this, Violet staggered backward, as if recoiling from some great shock.

Of course, Saya had seen all the relevant data on her opponent. Violet Weinberg was ranked number thirty-five at Queenvale Academy for Young Ladies; went by the alias of Overliezel, the Witch of Demolishing Bullets; and had the ability to create firearms and explosive armaments on the fly. And—from what Saya had heard from Sylvia—Saya, like Minato Wakamiya, had been receiving training from Xinglou Fan. In other words, since the fourth round, Saya had had to face two graduates of the Liangshan back-to-back.

"H-how could you?! It's disgraceful! Disgraceful! I've been looking forward to this match ever since the bracket for the main tournament was announced, and now you've just…!" For a second, Violet looked as if she might burst into tears, but she quickly lifted her head and glared at Saya. She looked to be the type to let her emotions flow freely. "I'll give you a hint!" she called out. "Summer, two years ago! The pool at the Algol Dome!"

"Hmm…?"

The Algol Dome was one of seven medium-sized stages in Asterisk, and it doubled as an indoor swimming pool for students to use during the summer (although the opening date was moved forward during those years when the Phoenix was held).

"Hmm… The Algol Dome…"

"Hint two: you were with the Keen-Edged Tempest!"

"With Kirin…? Ah, when I taught her how to swim, maybe…?" Saya murmured, slapping herself on the forehead.

Summer two years ago was when the Phoenix had taken place. Back then, she had only recently become tag partners with Kirin.

"Right, right!" Violet called back in excitement, eyes wide with expectation.

"Yeah… And?"

At this, Violet completely lost her balance, all but falling forward.

Saya *did* recall going to the pool once with Kirin, but what did that have to do with the strange girl standing across from her now?

"Arghhhhh! Hint three: The Keen-Edged Tempest bumped into me! We had an argument! And then you and I settled it with a shoot-out!"

"…Ohhh!" Only now did Saya remember. "You're that creepy little stuck-up girl who was looking to pick a fight with Kirin!"

At the time, Kirin had been thrashing through the water, trying to keep afloat, when she had bumped into a snobbish girl sleeping on an inflatable lounge chair, and the two of them had gotten into a bit of a quarrel.

"Right, right! That was me! Good! You've finally remembered!" Violet burst out, gripping Saya's hands and jumping up and down with joy.

"Yep, it's all clear now."

"Hold on!" Violet suddenly exclaimed, yanking her hands away as her face turned red with anger. "Creepy?! Stuck-up?!"

"Er… The match hasn't even started, but our contestants already look like they're getting themselves a bit worked up…"

"There's nothing in my data, but maybe there's a history between them?"

The voices of the announcer, Domitila, and the commentator, Maeve, were filled with bewilderment.

"Anyway… It's about time we got the match under way, you two, so how about we return to our starting positions?" Domitila urged them over the loudspeaker.

"…Oh."

"Huh…?"

Saya and Violet, the latter still looking a little flustered, did as instructed, when the automated voice rang out:

“Round 5, Match 5—begin!”

Saya was the first to make a move.

“Type thirty-nine Lux laser cannon, Wolfdora,” she murmured, deploying the Lux and fixing her aim. “Boom.”

She unleashed the weapon’s power without even waiting for it to fully charge. Having finally recalled their previous encounter, she had decided to attempt to reproduce the flow of their shoot-out as best she could, as that would best allow her to gauge just how much her opponent had grown since then.

This one move had been enough to take out Violet back then, and yet—

“Don’t underestimate me!”

Her opponent slipped past the torrent of light, activating her own musket-type Lux and rapidly shortening the distance between them.

I guess I knew it wouldn’t be as easy as last time… But close-range combat…?

Long-range combat was Saya’s forte, but thanks to the fact that she had been training alongside Ayato since childhood, she also had several close-range techniques of her own. Violet, on the other hand, given her unique abilities, should have been much more comfortable keeping a distance. Naturally, Saya had been expecting the match to take the form of a shoot-out from opposite sides of the stage—and while Violet may have shown some skill at defending herself when her foes got too near during the preliminaries, there should have been no need for her to intentionally come so close.

…Fine. If that’s what she wants.

Saya swapped the Wolfdora for the type 34 wave cannon Ark Van Ders and pulled the trigger.

“Take this!”

“…What?”

As Violet aimed her musket straight for her school crest, Saya pushed the barrel aside with her own and then grabbed her opponent by the wrist, bringing her weapon down on her abdomen. The considerable weight and size of the Ark Van Ders’s gun barrel made it particularly useful in close-range combat.

Violet leaped backward to dodge the worst of the attack, just as the air around her began to warp as twelve fist-sized shells suddenly materialized.

That ability is fast…!

“Fire!”

Saya shielded herself with her Lux. Fortunately, the ensuing explosion wasn’t particularly powerful—no doubt so that it wouldn’t engulf the one who had unleashed it.

The next instant, Violet, having landed safely on the ground, launched into her next close-range move. On top of that, a new volley of shells had appeared around her, bearing down on Saya as Violet rushed toward her.

"Ngh…!"

With the Ark being as large as it was, Saya was forced to take the defensive once more.

She slammed the huge Lux, as if it were no more than a simple club, against Violet's oncoming musket and did everything she could to avoid the incessant barrage forming around her.

But then—

"And this!"

"Yikes!"

It had been only the smallest of openings, but Violet had taken advantage of it to fire a burst with her musket. It was only to be expected, but that weapon of hers worked as a gun as well.

"In that case… *Burst*!" Having finished charging the Ark Van Ders, Saya let loose a volley of her own.

Violet, however, as if having seen through her move, casually stepped backward, letting the wave of light sweep past her.

"Heh-heh! Did you really think I'd fall for such an obvious trick?"

"Wow, what an unusual turn! Both contestants are using their firearms as if they're blunt weapons!"

"Sylvia Lyyneheym has a similar combat style. As far as this match is concerned, though, it looks to me like Weinberg has the advantage at this range."

As much as Saya hated to admit it, Maeve was right on the mark.

When it came to the skill with which they wielded their respective weapons, there probably wasn't a lot of difference between the two of them. However, thanks to her opponent's Strega abilities, Saya was fighting with a significant handicap.

Through its application of the LOBOS transition method, Saya could redirect the excess energy produced by the Ark to produce a defensive field that allowed her to withstand her opponent's close-range strikes. Violet's musket, on the other hand, looked to have been designed specifically with its use as a melee weapon in mind. Judging by its appearance, it could only fire projectiles one at a time, with its main purpose probably being to give her a physical form to use when imaging her abilities. In short, that weapon was proof that she intended to focus on fighting at close range.

"…Well, I should have expected this from someone who trained at the Liangshan," Saya murmured.

Irene, Priscilla, Minato, and Lester each had their own unique ways of fighting, but they had all developed remarkably competent

skills in close combat.

"Oh? You know about it? I'm impressed," Violet answered with a smile.

"I heard there's a ranking system there… What are you?"

"Hmph! *Koubu*, of course! The highest rank!" she declared proudly, flicking her hair back with a flourish.

That wasn't what Saya had wanted to hear.

"But still! That's not why I'm fighting against you up close!"

"Oh?"

Violet's expression, at first self-satisfied, turned suddenly serious. "I've disliked you since long before that incident at the pool."

"…I'm afraid I don't remember ever doing anything to make you feel that way."

She wasn't completely out of theories, but her opponent's next words came as a complete surprise.

"Saya Sasamiya, I've heard that you're an old friend of Mister Ayato Amagiri!"

…*Mister?*

"It's true that Ayato and I have been bound by fate since we were just kids, but what does that—"

"Argh! I—I'm so jealous…! I'm a huge fan of his!"

"Oh… You have a good eye." Saya nodded in understanding.

"Right? But! That's exactly why I can't stand to watch your mangled attempt at pulling off the Amagiri Shinmei Style! I don't know how long you've been training with him, but it's not yours to flash around!"

"…So you're jealous?"

"Quiet! I'm making a serious complaint here!" Violet snapped back, spinning the muzzle of her musket around toward her.

"But you know…if you're going to cling to that butchered fighting style, then I'm just going to have to go all out as well!"

"…" Saya raised an eyebrow at this affected display of provocation, before letting out a short sigh and shaking her head. "No, I'll stop," she murmured, deactivating the Ark and switching to her type 41 Lux homing blaster, the Waldenholt Mark II.

In the past, she might have responded to her opponent's provocations and rushed headfirst into a melee. After all, as imperfect as her techniques may have been, they were important memories of experiences shared with Ayato.

However, she understood also that the experiences she was still to share with him would be no less precious than those that had come before.

"Hmm… You're taking this better than I thought. All right, then, let's decide this properly! But I'll warn you now—I'm the one who's

going to win!"

With that confident declaration, Violet swung her musket aside, glowing spheres of light manifesting along its path one after the other. There were more than three times as many of them now as she had employed before—close to fifty in total. If this was what she was normally capable of, then fighting up close must have been a serious burden on her concentration.

"Fire!" she commanded—and with that, the brilliant projectiles began to launch.

Saya fully deployed the vernier of the Waldenholt, sliding backward across the stage as she moved away from the raining torrent. Behind her, blasts of burning air coursed past her as those shell-like bullets exploded one after the other. These projectiles were clearly much more powerful than those of Violet's last assault.

That said, at this distance, Saya wasn't about to let herself be defeated.

"Burst."

Taking the necessary evasive actions, she waited until she could find an opening and then let loose with her homing blaster.

As far as raw speed was concerned, Violet was nowhere near her opponent from the fourth round, Curtis Wright—and that meant that it would be impossible for her to dodge all six of the weapon's beams.

"Green Mace!"

With a dauntless grin, Violet, however, unleashed a torrent of rootlike flashes of light beneath her feet with a swing of her musket, the arcs annihilating themselves against the beams of Saya's homing blaster. They had somehow managed to disperse the energy of her homing beams before they could reach their target.

Ngh, she has an interceptor technique…?!

"Willie Pete!"

Not stopping there, several of Violet's projectiles then detonated midair, blanketing the stage in a thick white cloud.

"A smoke screen?!"

Saya wasted not even a second before adjusting her aiming monitor, but her sensors proved ineffective. Although it was likely that Violet had been left just as blind as she herself was.

"Whoa…!"

Or so she thought, until a chain of explosions suddenly wrapped around her.

Her opponent's strategy seemed to be to blanket a large area with attacks in an attempt to hold her down.

Given that she couldn't do the same thing with the Waldenholt, Saya was left unable to counter using the same course of attack. All she could do was keep moving and focus on dodging those strikes. The

audience wouldn't allow her opponent to keep up this smoke screen forever, so she would have to let it clear sooner or later.

But it wasn't long before Saya was made to realize just how naive that idea had been.

"—?!"

The ground beneath her feet suddenly exploded, sending her reaction-control vernier flying.

A trap…! That was like a land mine…! So the smoke screen was just a diversion so she could lay these…

The Li twins had used a similar tactic during their quarterfinals match at the Phoenix, and they had managed to leave her completely cornered.

And with her vernier destroyed, she wouldn't be able to move across the stage at high speed any longer.

The smoke covering the stage gradually lifted, revealing the silhouetted figure of her opponent as she aimed her musket.

Violet was about to launch into her next volley.

Saya was left with no choice but to protect herself with a defensive field—but no sooner had she decided as much than her instincts raised the alarm. She leaped backward all but reflexively as a fresh bombardment made direct contact with her back unit. These new projectiles, long and narrow, were completely unlike the last ones—designed specifically, she could tell, to cut through her defensive field.

"Armor-piercing shells…?!"

Not only did those projectiles tear through her defensive field, but they also destroyed what remained of her vernier, leaving her carrying no more than a pair of oversized guns. Saya immediately purged the Lux and spun around in an attempt to escape.

At that moment, another burst of projectiles crashed straight into the Waldenholt, engulfing it in a huge explosion.

"Guh…!"

Though the explosion sent her flying, Saya readied her next weapon, activating it the second she rose back to her feet.

"Type thirty-eight Lux grenade launcher, Helnekraum."

And with that, she intercepted the next wave of projectiles that came flying toward her with an incredible burst of light.

The explosion ignited at point-blank range, the searing shock wave coursing past her—but it was better than falling victim to a direct hit.

"Hmm! Just so you know, I wasn't expecting you to dodge that one!"

As the blast subsided, the smoke screen parted to reveal Violet, standing in the center of the stage with an unconcerned expression.

“This has been a very one-sided course of affairs… Are our two contestants really that different in ability?”

“No, Contestant Weinberg’s tactics have merely given her the upper hand over Contestant Sasamiya. Her Strega abilities are complementing those tactics perfectly, in a way that completely overshadows all our past data on her.”

As it happened, Saya hadn’t anticipated that Violet’s abilities could be so diverse. In terms of offensive techniques, her versatility seemed to be comparable even to that of Julis. On top of that, her abilities had evolved in such a way that the data from her past matches were hardly even relevant.

To put it simply—

“…You’re strong,” Saya grudgingly acknowledged as she glared across the stage toward her opponent.

“…She’s strong,” Hufeng found himself murmuring.

At this, Xinglou, at his side, gave him a deep nod. “She’s the one who showed the greatest potential for growth at the Liangshan. That said, her power and talents are still too much for her. She has a way to go yet before truly mastering them. Oh-ho!” She broke into a shrill laugh, glancing up toward him with a look of unusual contentment. “Don’t you remember? I said that one of them managed to land a blow on me. It was her.”

“What?!”

Hufeng jumped to his feet in shock.

“Sh-she… With you…Master?”

“Oh, you don’t believe me?”

“N-no, it’s just…”

Hufeng was lost for words. It was true that he found it difficult to believe. While Violet Weinberg was clearly a very capable fighter, from what he had seen, she simply hadn’t come across as a force to be reckoned with.

To think she had landed a blow on Xinglou…

“It’s true I let down my guard, but as a Strega, she has real potential. She may not be able to stand up against the best at close range, even taking her support abilities into account, but at a distance, she’s the foremost fighter in this tournament. That’s thanks to her raw power, her range of techniques, her speed at deploying them, and above all… Her skill at adjusting her tactics as necessary in real-time tower above the others’.”

“Her tactics…”

Now that he thought about it, the commentator Maeve had said something similar.

“She hadn’t made much real progress until I began with her, but that was because she only sought out opponents of a lower rank than herself. Which was why, at the Liangshan, I forced her to keep challenging me. Whether she wanted to or not, I made her polish her martial arts, and…this, too.” Xinglou grinned, tapping her temple with her finger.

“I—I see…”

At this, Cecily, until now listening to their exchange in silence, raised her hand. “But, Master, wouldn’t that make her the strongest person at the Liangshan?”

“In any normal situation…at long-range combat, yes, Violet is perhaps the strongest. In close combat, however, and if we’re taking Orga Luxes into account, it might go to Minato. Who would have expected both top contestants to hail from Queenvale? Well, we’re just talking in general, keep in mind.”

“In any normal situation…?”

Did that mean that there were exceptions?

“So would either of them be able to beat Fuyuka?”

“Now, that’s a foolish question, Cecily. The whole point of the Liangshan was to develop a single aspect of each student, a test to see whether I could prompt them to overcome their barriers. They can’t compare in overall strength to fighters like Fuyuka or Xiaohui.”

“But…Elder Disciple—the Glühen Rose beat him…”

“That’s what makes it so interesting! It was unfortunate that Paula and Leon had to face Erenshkigal and that neither Noelle nor Curtis reached their full potential, but Minato put up a good fight against Ayato Amagiri. The Urzaiz sisters and Lester did well, too. I wonder what Violet has for us? Oh-ho! This will be entertaining!”

Hufeng couldn’t help but notice that Xinglou was unusually talkative—a complete change in character from when she had been watching the match between Julis and Xiaohui. Her ecstatic expression remained unchanged, but during the previous match, there had been something dreadful lurking behind that broad grin of hers. Now, however, whatever it had been looked to be gone.

Indeed, it was impossible to deny that her students at the Liangshan had done remarkably well thus far—although he had his doubts that had to happen at the cost of Jie Long’s own contestants.

“Now then, let’s see what she has!”

“…Ah! O-of course!”

At the sound of his master’s voice, Hufeng turned his gaze back to the unfolding match.

“Boom!”

“Useless! Useless, useless, useless, useless, useless!”

Saya let forth bombardment after bombardment with her Helnekraum, but as before, Violet intercepted each and every one of them.

"Ngh…!"

"Now, my turn! *Excalibur!*"

The next thing Saya knew, her opponent had sent three guided shells soaring toward her.

Saya readied the Helnekraum with her right arm, using the handgun in her left hand to fire off a quick volley, destroying two of the oncoming projectiles. The final shell came dangerously close, and while she managed to dodge it at the last second, she wasn't fast enough to escape the point-blank explosion.

"Guh…!"

"That's not all!" Violet refused to let up, leaping after her mercilessly as she was thrown down.

Lifting her upper body from the ground, Saya fired back at the oncoming tempest with her still-recharging Helnekraum and the handgun in her left hand, destroying each of the oncoming shells in a powerful blast.

"Haah… Haah…!"

"Y-you're persistent…!" Violet called across the stage.

While Saya had been able to avoid receiving a direct hit, she had accumulated considerable damage from the continued point-blank exchanges.

Violet, on the other hand, perhaps having overused her Strega abilities and prana, looked close to exhaustion.

Both contestants retreated to their respective sides of the stage to catch their breath.

"Contestant Sasamiya looks to be barely withstanding her opponent's continued assault… But don't you think Contestant Weinberg is starting to look a bit tired as well?"

"Indeed. But Weinberg's overwhelming advantage remains unchanged. Sasamiya's Luxes may pack more power into each shot, but Weinberg isn't letting up, not to mention the speed with which she can deploy her abilities. She's effectively forcing Sasamiya to stick to the defensive."

"It certainly does look like Sasamiya is using all her attacks to counter those of her opponent…"

Saya had to admit that it would be difficult to break out of her current predicament so long as Violet maintained the initiative. That said, she couldn't imagine her opponent would be willing to let up any time soon.

"…Well, there's no progress without sacrifice," she muttered, returning her handgun to its holster and throwing off her uniform jacket.

Underneath, a large metal belt was wrapped around her body—a garment resembling a bulletproof vest but comprised of countless interlinked pieces of manadite.

"Huh…? What's that supposed to be?" Violet frowned with suspicion.

"…S-Module, activate."

Saya didn't bother to respond. She merely removed the belt of manadite from her waist and clipped it into the Helnekraum.

As she did so, a boxlike object manifested to engulf the Lux's manadite core, with the manadite belt drooping down from inside.

"Whoa… That looks like one hell of a power-up…"

"Hmph! Whatever you're playing at, I'm still going to win! Take this! *Canister Shot!*"

Violet's next attack was comprised of a single oversized shell.

Seemingly no sooner did she release it, however, than it broke apart in midair, sending more bullets raining down on Saya than she could count.

A shrapnel blast…! But—!

The assault fanned out over a large swath of the stage, leaving her with nowhere to flee.

Fortunately, she had no intention of running.

She lowered the Helnekraum to shield herself from the barrage, using the small window of opportunity that had revealed itself to her to recalibrate the S-Module. Unable to shield her whole body, she focused her prana in her arms and legs to try to withstand the bombardment. The bullets lacerated her flesh and put her bones under pressure, but to her relief, they weren't powerful enough individually to tear through her.

"Full burst."

Saya, however, paid those injuries no heed as she readied the Helnekraum, aiming it squarely toward her opponent.

"Boom."

And then, in her usual style, she pulled the trigger.

"Hmph! Let's see what you've got…!—Huh?" Violet's confidence suddenly flagged, her eyes opening wide in surprise.

At that instant, the bullets of light that shot out from the Helnekraum were more than twice their usual size.

"Wh-whoa…! *G-Green Mace!*"

Countless bursts of light erupted beneath Violet's feet to intercept her attack, but they were all effortlessly pushed back. That was only natural. Nothing could stop Saya's Luxes once they were armed with the S-Module.

"Eep…!"

With a dazzling flash and a deafening roar, the incredible blast

tore through the stage.

“Wh-what a violent explosion…!”

Saya pushed the astonished voice of the commentator out of her mind as she cast aside the now-useless piece of manadite she had fed into her weapon from the S-Module.

Though still incomplete, the S-Module was one of two trump cards that she had prepared specifically for the Lindvolus. Each of her Luxes was capable of employing the LOBOS transition method, and while combining multiple manadite cores allowed them to output an incredible amount of power, their chief weakness lay in the fact that they needed to cool down for a considerable length of time after use so as not to induce a mana excitation overload.

However, all it took was changing one’s way of thinking to view that disadvantage as a positive.

Luxes were usually equipped with a limiter to control their output, but a good many users tended to manually remove such devices. In such cases, the risk of pushing the manadite core beyond its limits, resulting in its premature destruction, was considerable. And because Luxes took their respective forms based on the memory imprints belonging to those manadite cores, their destruction naturally rendered the Luxes themselves useless.

However, since Saya’s Luxes utilized the LOBOS transition method and were powered by multiple pieces of manadite, they would remain functional unless all of those cores were destroyed simultaneously. Of course, they would become highly unstable in such a state, not to mention difficult to operate, but she could always swap the spent manadite out for fresh pieces.

Indeed, that was precisely what the S-Module was designed to do —to swap out spent manadite with new, undamaged pieces. In other words, she could maximize the destructive potential of her Luxes by repeatedly pushing their manadite cores beyond their limits and replacing them as necessary.

However, the S-Module was, after all, still incomplete, and it remained difficult to operate. In its present state, the output of each manadite core had to be manually calibrated by the user and the energy focused on the core she wanted to push past its limit. Saya’s Luxes had never been particularly user-friendly, but this only added to their complexity.

“Th-that’s…! Uh-oh…!”

Violet’s wavering figure emerged slowly from the ensuing cloud of dust. Her uniform had been torn to tatters, and her left arm looked to be broken, but her eyes were still filled with fire.

“She’s still standing! Contestant Weinberg took that blast head-on, but she’s still standing!”

"…No, it looks like Contestant Sasamiya's aim was a little off for once, leaving Weinberg enough of a margin to dodge the worst of it. That said…the damage does look severe."

…I suppose I still need to work on my aim, Saya thought, biting her lip in frustration.

But of course, there was nothing she could do but keep going, and she quickly focused her attention back on her opponent.

"Now it's…my turn!" Violet called out, pointing the musket gripped in her right hand up to the sky as its tip swelled with mana.

"You're still going all out…?"

"I'll grind you into dust! *Red Beard!*"

A huge shell close to five meters in diameter came into being over her head, launching directly toward Saya at tremendous speed.

"…Full burst."

Saya, however, maintained her composure as she readied the Helnekraum.

"Whaaaaat?! R-rapid fire?!"

Thanks to the unique construction of the S-Module, Saya had been able to minimize the charge time between consecutive shots—although, of course, there was a danger that the gun barrel wouldn't be able to hold out as long as her stock of manadite.

"Boom!"

The brilliant burst of light launching out of the Helnekraum flew straight into Violet's own enormous projectile—and as it did so, an explosion beyond any the match had yet seen engulfed the stage. The shock wave was enough to tear a gaping crater in the ground and send both contestants flying backward.

"Ugh…!"

"Gah…!"

As the blast and raging heat subsided, a terrible silence descended on the stage. No one—not the audience, the commentator, or the announcer—said anything to disturb the eerie sense of calm that fell over them all.

Amid that silence, both contestants rose to their feet.

"I…won't…lose!" Violet howled as ten, fifty, a hundred—more projectiles than the eye could count—emerged around her.

"Type thirty-five Lux Gatling cannon, Granvaleria." Saya, meanwhile, swapped out the Helnekraum for the Granvaleria, equipping it with the S-Module. "Fire! Boom, boom, boom, boom, booooooooooom!"

A seemingly endless torrent of racing bullets emerged from its heavy-duty muzzle at a rate of more than four thousand per minute. Projectile collided with projectile, bullet with shell, all canceling each other out and consuming one another in balls of flame.

“Gooooooooo!”

“Nghhhhh…!”

The two contestants seemed to be evenly matched. Every now and then, a shell would pass through the bombardment, detonating behind Saya’s head, just as one of her own bullets would fly past Violet, but neither was able to score a direct hit.

Violet seemed to be pouring every last ounce of her prana into her assault, still not letting up with her torrent of fire.

Saya, likewise, continued to feed one manadite core after another into her weapon, maintaining its output at the highest level.

Like stars twinkling in the night, bullets and shells were born and died in the air.

Of course, neither contestant would be able to maintain their rate of fire for long.

The exchange couldn’t have lasted more than ten seconds before coming to a sudden end.

“Ah…”

“Ngh…!”

Violet staggered to her knees, while at the same instant, the barrel of Saya’s Granvaleria ruptured open.

But even so…

Violet raised her musket once more, just as Saya pulled out her handgun.

The sound of weapons fire broke out.

Compared to the prolonged bombardment that had engulfed the stage just a short moment ago, the sound of a single shot seemed almost inconsequential, and yet—

“Violet Weinberg—crest broken.”

“End of battle! Winner: Saya Sasamiya!”

—that small burst of light marked the end of their ferocious shoot-out.

*

Watching the match from her chair overlooking the stage in Agllekant Académie’s special viewing lounge at the Canopus Dome, Camilla Pareto gave voice to a hint of apprehension.

“I always knew it would turn out this way, but…now that it’s certain, I’m a little uneasy.”

Ernesta, sitting cross-legged beside her, was as relaxed as ever. “Oh? I’m practically bursting with excitement… But this is no time to relax, huh?”

With their respective proxy fighters, Rimcy and Lenaty, about to face off, their mutual composure was all the more noteworthy. Perhaps they were both brimming with confidence, or else…

As she had already announced, Camilla had no intention of yielding this match to her close friend. Saya Sasamiya had just made it through to the fifth round, so if Rimcy could win here, Camilla would finally have a chance to repay her debt from the Phoenix in the quarterfinals. And Rimcy was just as eager to face Saya again as she was.

"Hmm…! I wonder who Ardy will be supporting this time? His invaluable partner, Rimcy, or his cute little sister, Lenaty…? What a quandary!"

Behind them both, Ardy's towering figure was fidgeting with anxiety, his head grasped firmly in both hands.

On the stage below them, Rimcy had already deployed her ACM unit and exterior armor and was ready for battle. Lenaty, on the other hand, had activated the huge adjustable glaive-type Lux that Camilla had built for her, the Youdemra, its blade longer than Lenaty was tall.

"Well, if I could have it my way, I'd have preferred that we save this match for a little later. But I suppose it isn't unusual for entrants from the same school to be put against one another in the main tournament."

"That goes for Queenvale in round seven, too. But, Ernesta… there's something I need to ask you."

"Oh?"

"It's about that work you've been doing for those associates of yours. I don't mean to pry or anything…or at least, I *didn't* mean to, but there's been a lot of talk lately." Camilla paused there, opening a small air-window, which she then showed Ernesta. "It seems that Seidoukan's student council president has had Galaxy's lab take charge of this for analysis, all in absolute secrecy. One of my contacts informed me last night."

The air-window showed what looked like the strewn wreckage of some kind of machine. It was severely burned and damaged, and proper investigation of it would no doubt take a considerable length of time.

Camilla, however, recognized it at first sight. It was a puppet, of the same design as Ardy standing behind them.

"Oh dear… They must have activated its self-destruct system. Well, I suppose they *are* free to do whatever they want with them."

"So it *is* your work…"

"Yes. Well, it's a mass-produced version of the AR-D. A Valiant. Although strictly speaking, all they wanted were mere battle puppets. Pretty dull, really."

Ernesta's tone was one of disinterest. Having finished speaking, she rustled through the pocket of her lab coat, pulling out a handful of small candies.

"…The Golden Bough Alliance?" Camilla asked under her breath.

She had only recently learned its name, but she knew that its existence spanned many years.

Unlike Asterisk's other schools, Allekant Académie had no centralized intelligence agency under the school's own control. Rather, each of the various factions maintained their own network. As a result of that, the depth and quantity of the information they could acquire often lagged behind that available to the other schools.

On the other hand, students from Allekant's research class often made broad connections outside the Académie itself. After all, it wasn't unusual for successful researchers, no matter how young, to have some level of involvement with external projects. The most top-ranking of them, such as Camilla and Ernesta, or Hilda, had even been active before their enrollment and had often taken work from several different foundations. In other words, information gathering at Allekant was more of an individual responsibility than a group one.

Camilla and Ernesta had learned about that organization by mere chance while investigating potential avenues of countering the head of Tenorio, Hilda Jane Rowlands; Orphelia; Dirk Eberwein, Le Wolfe Black Institute's student council president, and the mysterious organization that Dirk belonged to… Although that was really all they had managed to unearth.

"Just what are these associates of yours planning?"

"Well, now… I'm not trying to obfuscate things here, really. I honestly don't know. I just delivered the work they wanted from me. I never met any of them in person."

"…Then just how effective are these Valiants?"

"They're no big deal. They're no match for Ardy, that's for sure… Well, they might pose a problem if they fight in numbers, I suppose…"

"In numbers? Just how many did you give them?"

At this question, Ernesta, a bar of chocolate hanging out of her mouth, flashed Camilla a sweet grin. "Around a thousand."

"Wha—?!"

Aghast, Camilla almost swallowed her tongue, completely lost for words.

Ernesta, however, merely gave her a sidelong glance, before clapping her on the shoulder. "Hey, come on, now! The match is about to start! Yes, Rimcy and Lenaty are both so *adorable*!"

She had already shifted her attention to the contest about to get under way.

For Camilla, too, that was obviously the most important matter at

hand. She was certainly concerned about these Valiants and Ernesta's associates, but she would have to deal with them later.

And having decided that, she turned her gaze back through the pane of reinforced glass to the stage below.

"It's time for what may well turn out to be the most unusual match of this tournament! Two proxy fighters from Allekant Académie, the first battle between autonomous puppets since their debut in the Phoenix! You won't want to miss a second, because this will be one for the history books!"

In stark contrast to the massive audience, working themselves up into a frenzy to the sound of the live commentary, Rimcy was as composed as ever.

"Our Master Camilla has just informed me that the opponent I must defeat has just won her fifth-round match. If I am to face her in the quarterfinal…I cannot afford to lose to you here. Even if you are my dear little sister and our Master Ernesta's proxy."

Rimcy wouldn't normally so much as dream of defying Ernesta, but this time she had been given permission to do her absolute best.

"Yahoo!" her younger sister replied, skipping around innocently. "Lena can't wait to battle you! But you know? Lena's going to win!"

Rimcy knew that Lenaty's specs exceeded her own. While she understood that victory and defeat couldn't be predicted based on numbers alone, the odds of her winning in a head-on fight were less than 30 percent.

She would have to go all out from the very beginning.

"Activating AR mode. Initiating connection."

As she acknowledged the prescribed conditions, a set of additional armaments materialized around her, merging with her exterior armor and covering her lower body with a skirt-shaped shield that unfolded into a steel wing almost twice the size of her ACM unit. At the same time, a hammer-type Lux like the one Ardy wielded materialized in her right hand.

"Now we're talking! We haven't even gotten under way yet, but Rimcy's already killing it!"

"That's…a similar process to when she merged with Ardy during the Phoenix. The components are similar…and this may just be a guess, but it looks like a reverse version of what we saw last time."

As was to be expected, the commentator had a sharp eye. Rimcy's additional armaments did indeed utilize spare parts from Ardy.

Originally, their fusion technique had been designed to transfer control over Rimcy's command system to Ardy, in order to boost the output of his urm-manadite core. The main point of equipping the parts separated from Rimcy was so that Ardy could boost his own

specs—the weaponry itself was secondary. Given that Ardy's core was composed of urm-manadite, Ernesta had jokingly referred to their combined form as Perfect Ardy.

For Rimcy, on the other hand, being powered by a regular manadite core, her new combined form served to drastically increase her specs and firepower. Similar to Ardy's combined form, Ernesta had taken to calling it Full Armor Rimcy.

"Ooh, so that's your reinforced armor, sis. But you know… Yep, it's too over-the-top! Not cute at all!"

"Indeed, it may not be the most elegant of armaments—but without it, I would stand little chance facing you."

Lenaty was armed solely with her Youdemra. She wore no armor—nor, for that matter, anything that resembled clothing.

Rimcy knew, however, that Lenaty required no such protection. Camilla had naturally downloaded the data relating to Lenaty into Rimcy. As such, she knew almost all of Lenaty's strengths and skills—with the exception of the purpose of the mechanisms surrounding her urm-manadite core, which not even Camilla fully understood.

Nonetheless, that advantage was mutual. Rimcy's creator, Ernesta, naturally knew everything there was to know about her own specs and performance as well, and had undoubtedly passed that knowledge on to Lenaty. Even the connection system for her present additional armaments had been developed by Ernesta.

"It's time. Let us both do our best and make this a good match," Rimcy declared.

"A good match…?" Lenaty tilted her head in apparent confusion.

"…Lenaty?"

"Hmm, I don't really understand… But I'll do my best!" she squeaked, before heading toward her starting position.

Rimcy found herself overtaken by a feeling she couldn't describe but quickly returned her attention to the battle at hand.

"Round 5, Match 6—begin!"

At the very moment the school crest at her chest rang out, the two of them leaped into action.

Rimcy increased the output of her flight unit, launching into the sky, while Lenaty jumped high into the air, bringing the Youdemra down to keep her from gaining height. While Rimcy met that blow head-on with her hammer, Lenaty's strength was easily enough to overcome her flight unit, pushing her back to the ground.

Rimcy let out a quick barrage with the assault rifle–type Lux she activated with her left hand, pushing Lenaty back as she tried to launch a follow-through attack. Her younger foe, however, continued

to close the distance between them, using the Youdemra as a shield.

A hammer swing was Rimcy's counter, but Lenaty brushed the attack aside with her left hand, before quickly circling around to her elder's blind spot as the Youdemra began to transform into a huge gun larger even than Rimcy herself.

Lenaty immediately fired off a powerful barrage; Rimcy rotated her body, sending a short burst of her own to cancel out the oncoming projectiles.

The difference in the output of their respective Luxes meant that she didn't have enough time to shoot down all her targets, forcing the armor wrapped around her lower body to defend her against the bullets as they made contact. In the meantime, Lenaty's Youdemra had returned to its previous form as a glaive-type Lux—but as she drove it forward in a quick flurry of strikes, Rimcy reduced the thrust of her flight unit, retreating and firing after her with her assault rifle.

Nonetheless, with a single bright flash, Lenaty cut through them all with the Youdemra, pressing forward once more.

"A-amazing! Just look at that rapid exchange of bullets, that fiery clashing of blades! Neither one of them is surrendering so much as a step or pausing for even a second! I've never seen a match move this fast!"

"Well, any normal person, no matter how great, would need to stop and catch their breath at some point…but that doesn't really apply to these two. It also looks like they know each other's moves perfectly, along with how to counter them."

It was exactly that.

Rimcy and Lenaty did know each other perfectly—or to be more precise, they were predicting one another's movements with perfect accuracy and selecting the best option available for countering them. At Allekant, this was commonly known as a processing battle, as both puppets had a perfect grasp of one another's specs and design. Indeed, this kind of fast-paced contest would be impossible against flesh-and-blood masses of irrationality and uncertainty, as her previous opponents had been.

After all, for puppets, knowing their opponent's specs and design in detail, it was easy to predict with a good degree of accuracy how they would move and respond in combat. While there were always infinite choices available, when calculating their expected outcomes, that number could be narrowed down to something much more manageable. On top of that, for puppets as powerful as Rimcy, there was little difficulty in compensating for any discrepancies between calculation and reality within a fraction of a second.

In other words, this match was nothing more than a race between processors to see which could outpace the other. Indeed, Rimcy knew that if the battle were to continue as it was now, she would lose at

some point between fifteen minutes and twenty-two seconds and seventeen minutes and forty seconds from the present moment. While they may have looked evenly matched, the difference between their respective specs meant she would be unable to calculate sufficient courses of action beyond that point.

That being the case, there were only two options available to her to break out of this cycle. The first was to select an irrational course of action. This would have been impossible for any ordinary puppet, but it was a different matter altogether for those like her who had been gifted with self-awareness. However, that would mean resetting the cycle of calculations, which carried a high risk of worsening her present situation.

Which left only the other option—

"Initializing anti-autonomous puppet floating mines. Activating dispersal."

"Huh?"

As Rimcy moved across the stage, her ACM unit deployed a continuous stream of floating mines. They were spherical in shape, each around fifty centimeters in diameter. They drifted across the stage as if billowed by unseen waves, always keeping a fixed distance from one another to prevent unwanted collisions.

Camilla had developed the floating mines independently for this battle against Lenaty and hadn't passed her data on them along to Ernesta. Using them now would inevitably make it impossible for Lenaty to maintain her sequence of calculations.

Watching them, Lenaty quickly brightened.

"Yeah! That's more like it! Mom said to stick to a processing battle at first…but now Lena can do whatever she wants!" she exclaimed gleefully, before slamming the Youdemra down on the closest floating mine.

"Wha—?!"

The second her weapon made contact, the mine exploded with a thunderous roar.

Individually, the mines weren't particularly powerful. Moreover, Lenaty incorporated a more advanced version of Ardy's defensive barrier, making her chassis extremely difficult to penetrate.

That, however, wasn't the purpose of the floating mines.

"What a downer. I thought you'd have more… Huh?" Lenaty began, before her knees suddenly gave way beneath her and she collapsed to the ground.

It was only an instant—just a momentary loss of balance—but for Rimcy, that was enough.

Powering her assault rifle up to maximum, she unleashed a merciless bombardment of bullets toward her opponent.

“Aieeeee!”

Lenaty screamed like an injured kitten as each bullet struck her, but the barrage didn’t seem to do much damage. That, however, was fine, so long as it bought Rimcy more time.

Rimcy had taken advantage of that window of opportunity to stow her hammer in her ACM unit and retrieve her secondary Lux.

“Activating Ruingörz.”

The Ruingörz was a towering sword-type Lux, longer even than Rimcy was tall. Camilla had designed the energy cannon with the express intention of surpassing the destructive power exhibited by Saya Sasamiya’s Luxes. Its manadite core let off a green glow as it rapidly charged its energy.

“Wow! That looks bad!”

Ernesta possessed data on the Ruingörz, so it was likely that Lenaty knew of its destructive potential. Panic seemed to wash over her as she tried to ready a countermeasure, but before she could properly prepare herself, the floating mines gathered around her.

“Aieeeee! Not fair!”

Camilla had expended a great deal of effort on perfecting the targeting program of those floating mines. Even with Lenaty’s considerable computational power, it was unlikely that she would be able to fully predict their movements.

On top of that, the floating mines were equipped with a special form of powdered manadite designed to temporarily inhibit the movements of autonomous puppets. Though that ability had been unknown in the early days of meteoric engineering, today, most Luxes and autonomous puppets were equipped with a special coating designed to block such interference. Naturally, that applied to both Rimcy and Ardy.

Lenaty’s coating, however, was incomplete. It wasn’t clear whether that was by design, but as very few weapons were designed to interfere with manadite cores anymore, it was possible that Ernesta had merely overlooked the weakness. Lenaty’s twin urm-manadite cores were undeniably powerful, but they came with a clear drawback.

“Discharging maximum output.”

“Waaaaah!”

Having finished charging the Ruingörz equipped to her right arm, Rimcy sent a piercing torrent of brilliant light straight for Lenaty. As the beam shot across the stage, the ground warped and caved beneath it, and the floating mines that found themselves caught in its path detonated one after the other. In Camilla’s testing, the destructive potential achieved when maximizing the urm-manadite’s power output had been more than enough to break through Ardy’s defensive

barrier. There was little chance that Lenaty would escape unharmed after receiving a direct hit.

However—

"Phew! Th-that was a close one…!"

Lenaty had dodged the oncoming blast by little more than a hairsbreadth, although she had appeared to be standing still the whole time.

If Rimcy had to guess, the beam had crashed straight into her own floating mines before reaching its target. Lenaty looked to have guarded nothing more than her school crest, but the fact that she looked otherwise undamaged was beyond unsettling. Fortunately, given the concentration of manadite powder released by the detonated mines floating through the air, it would be impossible for her to dodge a second shot.

However, it would take some time to recharge the Ruingörz.

She could try to get close and destroy her opponent's school crest in melee combat, but the risk of coming out second in a processing battle was too high. In that regard, Lenaty's computational power was simply overwhelming. Rimcy couldn't estimate just how long her opponent would be disabled, and recalculating once she recovered would be difficult.

In that case…I'll have to be sure.

No sooner did she make her decision than she discarded her assault rifle and began to reconfigure her left hand. What emerged was a new and improved version of her strongest lance, the Ruinsharif. The Ruingörz equipped to her right arm may have possessed more power, but the Ruinsharif was still the best in terms of accuracy and rate of fire.

This, however, was not the end.

"I wanted to save this for my battle against Saya Sasamiya, but now I have no choice… Initiating connection."

Rimcy brought both her left and her right arm—in other words, the Ruingörz and the Ruinsharif—in front of her, where they promptly merged into a single Lux so complete that it looked as if it had been designed to operate this way from the very beginning.

"Charging Ruindravalf."

The strategic, high-energy compound cannon let out a deep hum and bathed the stage in a green glow.

At the same time, Rimcy directed her remaining floating mines to completely surround her opponent.

"This is the end, my sweet sister."

"Wha—huh?! Camilla! First those floating mines, now that compound Lux?! What else are you hiding?!"

While Ernesta was clapping her hands together in excitement, Camilla merely continued to stare down at the stage in cool silence.

Lenaty, who many saw as merely a combat puppet, was simple in design. This was especially true when compared with the design of Rimcy, with her unparalleled offensive capabilities, or Ardy, with his absolute defensive power. The entirety of the tremendous energy output produced by Lenaty's parallel urm-manadite cores was allocated to basic operations. In other words, instead of capitalizing on the unique properties of those pieces of urm-manadite, the energy simply boosted her overall strength and agility. That was it. And because of that, it was practically impossible for her to counter against Rimcy unless she specifically tried to take advantage of some flaw or weakness. In a way, the current situation could be put down to the fact that Camilla and Rimcy's strategy had overcome Lenaty's raw specs.

No, she corrected herself, she shouldn't let herself get big-headed. Rather…

"Your design oversight may yet bring me victory," she murmured softly.

"Oh? You mean the gap in the coating protecting the cores? Well, I don't really have anything to say to that, aside from that I'm impressed you noticed it," Ernesta replied, cupping her jaw in one hand. "…And that you went so far as to design those new weapons to take advantage of it. I will admit, I slipped up there."

"It isn't like you to make a mistake like that. No, I doubt you slipped up. The fact that you didn't address it suggests you weren't worried about anything interfering with the core, but that's just carelessness…" Camilla stopped there, a distressing thought suddenly striking her.

Would Ernesta Kühne *really* do such a thing? Would a genius of her caliber really be so negligent and overconfident as to make a mistake that she, Camilla, could ascertain? Lenaty was her greatest masterpiece, a project into which she had poured her heart and soul. Would she really overlook a design flaw in something so important to her?

No. Of course not. Not the Ernesta Kühne she knew.

Only now understanding, Camilla glanced to her side to see Ernesta peering toward her through the gap between her fingers, her lips curled in a faint grin.

"Right, right, you see it now, don't you? That isn't a design flaw. Well, despite my best efforts, I couldn't get the coating to hold one hundred percent, so I'll take responsibility for that…but there's a reason why that gap leading to her core is necessary." Ernesta's grin grew wider with each word, until it was clear that she could hardly

contain her laughter. “You should have asked yourself, Camilla, why that gap is necessary in the first place. Ah, but I suppose I *did* hide it pretty well, so I can’t blame you for missing it. What I wanted you to notice, though… Ah, look, here it is.”

“Huh?!” Camilla found herself jumping to her feet as she realized what was about to happen. “No… No, no, no, no, no! That’s not possible…!”

For her, what she saw down on the stage was something that couldn’t possibly exist.

“…Ruindravalf, maximum output.”

With her compound Lux now fully charged, Rimcy focused her targeting reticle directly on her opponent.

Lenaty, for her part, was completely surrounded by the remaining floating mines, with no avenue of escape. Even if she were to try to dodge the bombardment as she had last time, there wasn’t enough room for her to escape the Ruindravalf’s fire. More to the point, she didn’t possess any weapons that could change the situation. After all, Camilla had designed all her armaments—and of all Camilla’s creations, the Ruindravalf was by far the most powerful.

If there *was* any way of surviving it, it would have to be—

“Arghhhhh! Lena’s sick of this! Get going, already!” Lenaty cried, before casting the Youdemra aside, leaning forward, and launching herself over the floating mines in a single giant leap.

No sooner did she reach the ground than Rimcy came rushing straight toward her.

“Rawr!”

“I thought you might attempt that. Firing Ruindravalf!”

Rimcy, having anticipated this possibility, climbed higher into the air and fired the Ruindravalf to intercept.

The burst of light bathed the whole stage in brilliant white as a vortex of pale silver engulfed her opponent.

This would settle it.

Not only Rimcy herself, but the announcer and commentator, the massed audience—everyone except Ernesta and Camilla—must have thought so, too.

And yet—

“Nee-hee-hee-hee-hee! Not yet!”

Tearing through that torrent with one hand, Lenaty’s small figure emerged from the blinding light.

As Lenaty passed right by her opponent, the only thing that filled Rimcy’s mind was Lenaty’s innocent smile.

“Wha—?!”

Rimcy spun around as quickly as she could, but as she did so, both

hands—in other words, the Ruindravalf—along with her right leg, the armor protecting the lower half of her body, and her ACM unit were shorn clean in two.

Lenaty had cut through them all with the side of her arm.

"Th-that's…"

Losing her balance, Rimcy crashed to the ground.

Lenaty went slowly over to her. "Yippee! Right in half!"

Only then did Rimcy realize that Lenaty's eyes had changed in color. But that wasn't all. The energy radiating from her right arm was beyond belief, far exceeding anything Rimcy had measured before. With two urm-manadite cores, that kind of power should have been impossible to control.

"I see… So that's it," she murmured.

It was extremely unlikely, but faced with the evidence in front of her, it was the only plausible explanation.

"Lenaty, are your cores variable types? Normally, your urm-manadite cores are controlled through parallel processing, but now… *they're linked using the LOBOS transition method*, aren't they?"

"Nee-hee-hee! Yep! Lena loves this Lena the most! All this energy just gushing up from deep inside!"

The LOBOS transition method was an imperfect technology, one that in its present incarnation placed a heavy burden on those who attempted to apply it, as it caused the energy output to become unstable even with regular manadite. To think that it had been applied to urm-manadite… This level of control would no doubt be impossible even for Saya Sasamiya, who was perhaps the most used to applying the process. If something were to go wrong, it wouldn't be at all surprising should the urm-manadite explode or, in the worst of cases, trigger a runaway cascade. The results could be catastrophic.

"Look, look! Sis! Isn't it amazing?"

Her voice filled with excitement, Lenaty shook her arm from side to side, casually tearing through Rimcy's left leg and what remained of her ACM unit. Her armor was all but useless. Faced with power such as this, there was simply no means of defense.

"…I understand, Lenaty. I am defeated."

Still lying flat on the ground, she let out a resigned sigh—and with that, her school crest made its announcement:

"End of battle! Winner: Ernesta Kühne!"

For the first time since the Phoenix, Rimcy found herself struck by feelings of regret—regret that she had no alternative but to renege on her promised rematch with Saya Sasamiya.

"Oh, is it over…? Boring! Lena wants to keep playing!" Lenaty put

her hand behind her head, pouting in displeasure, before suddenly peering into Rimcy's face as if remembering something. "Ah, right! Hey, Rimcy, sis! Did Lena make this a good match?"

"Huh…?"

"You said before that you wanted to have a good match, right? But Lena didn't know how to do that. Because that doesn't just mean winning, right? And Mom said something like that, too. That it's no good just to destroy my opponents."

"Ah… I see. You really don't understand just yet."

But Rimcy understood. Despite possessing such absolute power, Lenaty really was still a child. Just what would she learn in the days and years to come? Rimcy couldn't help but wonder whether her future experiences would shape this innocent young girl into a saint or a demon. It was a frightening thought.

She wanted to embrace her younger sister, but with her body the way it was, that was impossible. Instead, she answered her in a voice so gentle it surprised even herself: "I see… Perhaps I can teach you what I know."

"Yep!"

"In a good match…it doesn't matter who wins and who loses. So long as both contestants are fully satisfied, it was a good one."

"Fully satisfied…?" Lenaty stared back at her blankly.

"Were you satisfied with this match, Lenaty?"

"Hmm…" Lenaty shook her head.

"I thought so… I feel the same way. Unfortunately, I wasn't strong enough to give you anything more." Rimcy's smile was a complex mix of bitterness and pride. "However… I believe your next opponent, in the quarterfinals, will be different. *She* will give you a great match. I'm sure of it."

CHAPTER 5
ROUND FIVE IV

It was a quiet, pastoral, and if one was being unflattering, somewhat run-down town. Strictly speaking, it was more village than town—the ruins of a provincial city largely forgotten due to the excesses of centralization, the very image of a community of mostly abandoned homes held on to only by those with nowhere else to turn.

Sylvia Lyyneheym had been born in this small settlement nestled deep in the mountains.

There were several dozen residents in total. Most lived their lives self-sufficiently, without any distinctive qualities, but if there was one thing that stood out about them, it would have to be their pious observance of the teachings of God. That wasn't to say they were in any way cultlike. Worship and prayer, and upholding the commandments of their Lord, helped them to alleviate their poverty. In a world dominated by the integrated enterprise foundations, theirs was a remarkably honest community.

When she was young, Sylvia had been the only child to live in that town, and the only Genestella, too. And yet in spite of that, her neighbors had never made her feel isolated or excluded. They were good people, but they were also cowardly.

Even from her earliest days, she had known she was different from the others. As an only daughter, her parents showered her with love and affection, but there was always an invisible wall standing between her and them. It appeared to her at times for the briefest of moments, such as when she pulled her father's arm a little too strongly or inadvertently applied too much force to the tableware. And because of that, she grew passive and distant, often withdrawing inward and shutting herself away in her room.

It was on one such rainy day, when she had been reading to herself in solitude, that she heard a strange melody emanating from outside, mixed with the sound of the rain. She felt a strange stirring in her chest that she had never before experienced, and when she pulled

back the curtain over her window, she caught sight of a young woman humming to herself beneath the eaves of her house.

"Well, aren't you a sweet little face. I hope you don't mind if I wait out the storm here?"

The woman flashed her a soft, gentle smile. It was as if, in that ashen town, only her warm expression was rich with color. Taken by surprise, Sylvia quickly dragged the curtain shut—but for some reason she couldn't understand, her heart wouldn't stop racing.

That was Sylvia's first meeting with Ursula Svend.

Ever since that day, the unnamed song at the back of her heart continued to flow out.

That precious, refreshing song that she had heard amid the rain.

Now, in the Procyon Dome:

"I've got a good chance—or at least, I think I do."

The woman with long black hair, noble features, and an exotically tanned complexion (shown by revealing clothes) glared across the stage at her. She was shrouded in a mysterious ambiance, carrying a richly proportioned body and slender limbs, as well as a myriad of elaborate, glistening accessories.

Sylvia's opponent was the second-highest-ranked fighter at Queenvale Academy for Young Ladies, Neithnefer, the Goddess of Dance, alias Hathor. Not only was she renowned as the world's greatest dancer, but she was also a top-class martial artist on the level of Jie Long's greatest warriors. The fact that she was second to Sylvia and Rusalka in name recognition could be largely attributed to her strict avoidance of the media—in fact, the Festa was one of very few occasions when she appeared in public.

"Oh? *I* didn't want to fight you if it could be avoided, though…," Sylvia answered, activating the Fólkvangr.

Sylvia knew that Neithnefer, aka Nefer, disliked her, but as the academy's first- and second-ranked fighters, respectively, they were well acquainted.

"Petra must be so disappointed right now, about to see her two top students destroy one another. That was pretty bad luck, I think."

"The academy is of no concern to us here," Nefer replied coldly. "This is all about deciding who gets to fight Orphelia Landlufen."

Indeed, there was every possibility that whoever won this match would face Orphelia in the next round.

Of course, the eighth match hadn't yet gotten under way, and it wasn't impossible that Orphelia would lose. Nonetheless…

"Are you really so hungry for revenge?" Sylvia asked. "Although I can't say I don't understand how you feel…"

In the previous Lindvolus, Sylvia had lost to Orphelia in the championship match, just as Nefer had lost to her two cycles ago. Both of them had publicly vowed they'd win against her this time.

"Don't confuse the two of us. Unlike you, I'm not looking to face her again just to avenge my defeat," Nefer said sternly.

"Oh? Then why?"

"Because I can't forgive her. I've never been more humiliated in my life."

"…Because she beat you?"

"Because my dance failed to reach her heart!"

Sylvia found herself swallowing her breath at the power of the emotion that surged through those words.

"Back then…all I wanted to do was touch her heart, even with the faintest ripple. It didn't matter that I lost. I didn't care about that. I knew right from the beginning that we were poles apart in strength. Our abilities weren't suited to one another. But at the very least…I wanted to reach past that nihilism of hers and touch her soul!"

"Ah… I think I understand."

Even now, it would no doubt be all but impossible for Nefer to win against Orphelia Landlufen. She wasn't a Strega, and wielded neither Orga Lux nor regular Lux but used in battle only the flesh and blood of her own body. She possessed no techniques that would allow her to defend herself against Orphelia's poison, and she would never be able to get close enough to land an attack of her own. It wasn't just that she specialized in close combat—her unique abilities simply weren't suited to facing those of her would-be opponent.

And yet, Sylvia finally understood just why Nefer had put so much into reaching such an unbeatable foe.

It was her pride as an artist.

"I'm afraid I can't afford to surrender here. It's for a different reason, but I need to fight her again, too."

Sylvia's drive to win against Orphelia wasn't as noble as Nefer's. She simply couldn't stomach her defeat at their last encounter, and she hoped by winning this time to reach ever greater heights.

"That's fine. I never asked you to surrender. It doesn't matter whether or not I defeat *her*, but I won't lose to *you*."

"I am higher in rank than you, though, remember…?"

"Then prove that you've earned that position."

Sylvia and Nefer may have occupied neighboring positions in Queenvale's rankings, but they had never fought a match against one another.

"If that's what you want. Just don't blame me if you lose."

The two of them glowered across the stage at one another, before turning around simultaneously and falling back to their respective

starting positions.

"I've got no idea what our two contestants were just talking about, but look at those sparks fly!"

"Well, they are *the top two fighters at the same school. There could be all kinds of things going on between them."*

The announcer and commentator clearly didn't know what they were talking about, but Sylvia paid them no mind as she switched the Fólkvangr to firing mode.

"Round 5, Match 7—begin!"

Firing a burst of glowing bullets, Sylvia fell back.

Given that Nefer's techniques were exclusive to close combat, the first thing she had to do was put as much distance as possible between herself and her opponent. She could then use the breathing space that offered her to activate her abilities and proceed to the next stage of her strategy.

Or at least, that would be nice, but it probably won't go that smoothly…

As perhaps should have been expected, Nefer deftly dodged each of her attacks, rapidly drawing ever closer. Her motions were almost unbelievably fast, but more troubling than their pure speed was the fact that Sylvia couldn't read her next moves at all. No matter how many shots Sylvia took, no matter how accurate her aim, her opponent continued to let each and every one of them fly right past her. Nefer, however, wasn't feinting—rather, her movements adhered to their own laws, based on her own inner rhythm.

For that reason, they were clearly far from optimal for her opponents, roundabout and illogical in a way that made it impossible to predict what she might do next.

"Let's tear down our walls! Let's surpass ourselves!"

Still falling back, Sylvia began one of her regular songs designed to boost her physical strength. The question was what to do next—use her increased strength to avoid all attacks by leaping high into the air, or use her support abilities to narrow down the number of options available to her opponent.

"Hup!"

Wha—?!

At that moment, however, Nefer leaped into her range, and Sylvia failed to properly avoid the oncoming roundhouse kick.

"Gah…!"

The tip of the other girl's shoe dug into her left shoulder. But just as quickly, Nefer spun around, lashing out once more to the sound of a cool, chimelike jingling from the accessories that garbed her legs. This

time, however, Sylvia managed to catch the blow with the Fólkvangr—but it was a heavy strike that reverberated all the way into the core of her body.

Sylvia didn't need to be told that she was no match for her opponent at this range.

She hustled backward in an attempt to regain some distance, but Nefer merely continued to push forward, matching her step for step.

How can she…?! No, maybe my ability isn't strong enough…?!

With her songs, she could boost her physical strength to a level similar to that of Ayato or Xiaohui. As skilled as her opponent might be, she shouldn't have been able to compete with that. By all rights, she shouldn't have even been able to keep up with her.

"You've got a long way to go, Sylvia!"

Nefer's outstretched palm drew one long arc after another through the air, tearing through Sylvia's uniform and skin, leaving her with no alternative but to pull her arms close to protect her chest as the strikes kept coming.

"Urgh…!"

Grimacing in pain, she pulled back as far as she could to fire point-blank with the Fólkvangr, but—

"No such luck!" Nefer crowed.

—despite her best efforts, her opponent managed somehow to evade even that.

How can she dodge them at this distance…! Argh!

The attempt, however, had given her an opportunity to fall back that she couldn't ignore.

"Soar through the heavens, O wings of determination! One day I will lead you to the other side of tomorrow!"

As Sylvia sang, a pair of luminescent wings sprouted from her back. It was the same kind of ability as Julis's Strelitzia technique, but unlike that move, which was based fundamentally on a motif of flowers and flames, Sylvia's allowed greater mobility—or at least, it should have.

"Too slow!"

Before she could rise, Nefer leaped toward her, twisting through the air and launching an unexpected drop kick. Sylvia rushed to avoid it, but far from increasing her speed, she lost her balance and suffered a direct hit.

"Hyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Knocked down, she managed to prevent herself from enduring too awkward a landing, but she couldn't stop her wings of light from being extinguished.

"What's wrong, Sylvia? Aren't your songs working?"

Nefer, landing a short distance away, flashed her a suggestive

grin.

"…What did you do to me?"

Unlike her opponent, Sylvia worked to maintain her calm as she gazed across the way.

Her abilities weren't having the effect they should—a first for her. She couldn't tell whether it was the result of a Strega ability or an Orga Lux, but in either case, Nefer didn't seem to be the one behind it.

"I haven't done anything. If there's a problem, it's with you alone."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Ah… This is what I meant when I said you've got a long way to go. You haven't even realized that your rhythm is off."

"Wha—?!"

Sylvia couldn't hide her shock.

Her abilities certainly were extremely delicate when it came to such details—to the extent that if her rhythm or pitch was off by even a fraction, it could have a dramatic impact on their effectiveness.

That said, Sylvia had absolute confidence in her singing ability. She was more than capable of singing her songs in the heat of battle without letting the situation affect her performance. Even she would admit that she was rather unusual in that regard—no matter how fierce her movements or how dizzying the changes in the situation, her mind would always remain unperturbed. That wasn't something that could be pulled off without the necessary skill or determination. So-called universal abilities like her singing were the result of lifelong study and effort, and she had implicit confidence in her all-but-instinctive ability to hit the right notes.

And yet—

"If you don't believe me, just give it a shot!" Nefer declared, launching toward her once more.

"I don't need you to tell me that!"

Sylvia reconfigured the Fólkvangr to its sword mode, took a deep breath, and began to let loose with her next song.

"Let's tear down our— Huh?!"

She could tell something was wrong just with the first measure.

As Nefer had said, her rhythm was indeed ever so slightly off.

But why…? I'm being particularly careful, and yet…

At that instant, Nefer's dance moved effortlessly into a chain of consecutive kicks aimed right for her. Sylvia fought to hold her off with the Fólkvangr as she probed her own mind for an explanation, but her opponent wasn't about to let her stop and think.

Nefer's attacks were elegant, dynamic, dazzling—every one of her movements and gestures, from her fingertips all the way down to her feet, everything flowing, everything mesmerizing. For her, there was

no difference between the arena and the dancing stage—they were both merely places for her to showcase her talents.

Nefer's dance was said to appeal to people's basest, most primal instincts—and even Sylvia had to admit she was being irresistibly drawn into it.

"That's it!"

Sylvia cursed her carelessness while at the same time finding herself truly awed by just what the tanned beauty dancing in front of her had managed to accomplish.

"Oh? So you've finally realized it…"

With each flourish of her body, with each clear sound that emanated from her glistening accessories, Nefer's fists came flying at seemingly irregular, unpredictable trajectories. Sylvia's physical skills and abilities being what they were right now, countering all the blows was proving to be more than she could handle. She could afford to prioritize protecting only her school crest, forced to ignore her other strikes as she raced to find a way to shake her opponent off.

“Guh…!”

“Hyup!”

At that moment, however, Nefer used her momentum to swing around, delicately spinning backward across the stage to put some distance between them.

“Phew…”

Sylvia let out a sigh of relief before calmly surveying the situation.

She had been forced to endure more attacks than she could count, but fortunately, she hadn’t suffered too much damage. That said, it was clear to her what the outcome would be if the match were to be prolonged at close range. She had to restore her Strega abilities to their full strength, to regain control over her songs.

But she understood now just how difficult that would be. And the reason for that was simple—just as her opponent had said, the cause lay with Sylvia herself.

“I’m impressed, Nefer. That dance of yours really is enthralling… It pulls you in, whether you want it to or not.”

“Naturally. All those who look upon my dance—old or young, man or woman, of all languages and cultures—so long as they’re human, they can’t resist it. Whether they like it or not, it’s impossible to escape. I still hadn’t perfected it last time, but now, even Orphelia Landlufen won’t be able to help but be charmed by it.” Nefer’s voice was filled with absolute confidence.

What was most astonishing about her dance was that, strictly speaking, it wasn’t like a Strega or Dante ability, or even the power of an Orga Lux. Rather, she achieved that effect using nothing more than her physical body.

Of course, as enthralling as it was, it didn’t leave those who watched it completely powerless. Sylvia suspected that it interfered with the precise timing of its victims’ breathing and momentum, thereby throwing them off when it mattered most. That was all. But in the kind of close-combat fighting she specialized in, that was enough.

Most troubling for Sylvia herself was the fact that it was able to disturb her rhythm. She found herself being pulled into Nefer’s tempo completely unconsciously, and that in turn meant that her songs couldn’t take their full effect.

“Heh-heh, it looks like it’s particularly effective against you. I’m honored to be recognized by the world’s most popular diva!” Nefer mocked as she leaped into the air, rotating her body like a spinning top as she launched into another flurry of repeated kicks.

“Oh, it’s nothing new! I’ve always recognized your skills!” Sylvia bent backward to avoid the attack, but her opponent, landing safely on the ground, pushed on, tripping her over with another follow-up

kick. Unable to dodge the blow, Sylvia caught herself on the ground with both hands, bounding up with a powerful handstand. “Though I suppose I should thank you, too! For recognizing me as a diva!”

“I’ve said this over and over, but I don’t like you! Your songs, though, are another matter!” Nefer pushed once more against Sylvia’s Fólkvangr, throwing her backward. Next, she began to lay into another kick—but before she could reach her target, Sylvia, one step ahead of her, switched her Lux over to shooting mode and held her back with a burst of glowing bullets.

“Tch!”

With her opponent having given up her pursuit, Sylvia landed softly on the ground, returning the Fólkvangr to her defensive posture.

“…What have I ever done to you to make you hate me so much?”

“We’re opposites, you and I. We aren’t compatible.”

“Opposites…?”

That was too abstract for Sylvia to fully grasp, but even so, she couldn’t say she didn’t sympathize. For Nefer, dance was an expression of her innermost soul. That was how she could appeal to the deepest instincts of those who watched her. But it was a lonely path to travel.

For Sylvia, on the other hand, song was merely a means to an end. It was the only way she had of grasping the freedom she desired so she could convey her existence to the world. To that end, she constantly polished her lyrics and art and never stopped working on broadening her knowledge.

“Hmph. We’re not here to talk. Let’s finish this.” And with that, Nefer began to strike a new rhythm with her feet.

At first, it was as delicate as a heartbeat, but it gradually picked up pace, becoming fiercer, faster, until in no time at all, her whole body was in motion.

“Wow…”

It wasn’t long before Sylvia could see the music. With Nefer’s every movement, nonexistent instruments reverberated around her, their pitch and timbre increasing in intensity, climbing ever higher in an inescapable crescendo. No doubt everyone in the audience found themselves caught up in that dance, too.

This is going to be a problem…

The overwhelming rhythm was filled with such emotion that it was impossible to pull away from it. Even if she were to close her eyes and block her ears, the movements would still be conveyed to her through minute vibrations in the air. Did she have anything in her inventory, Sylvia couldn’t help but wonder, that could withstand this onslaught?

But no, that wouldn’t help here. It wasn’t her songs that were the

problem. As Nefer had said, it was the singer herself who still needed development.

What good does it do to be the world's most popular singer if I can't even do this…?!

She cursed her inability, bracing herself with the Fólkvangr for her opponent's next strike. Now wasn't the time for regret or introspection. She had to do whatever she could, even if she was at an impossible disadvantage.

But then, at that very moment, a nostalgic, refreshing melody welled up from the depths of her chest.

It was the song she had listened to as a young child, the song that had come to form a bridge between herself and the outside world.

It was only fragmentary, and she didn't even know its name, but it was definitely that song.

"…Ursula," she remembered, the name slipping from her lips.

Her songs possessed deep meaning.

Familiar faces flashed across her vision one after another: Ursula and Petra, everyone in Rusalka, Minato, and Ayato, too.

"Run, run! Let's tear down our walls! Let's surpass ourselves! Run, run!"

Sylvia began to sing, her voice echoing across the stage.

"…Tch!"

Nefer's eyes opened wide in surprise, but it wasn't long until she broke into a fearless grin.

The very next moment, she increased her tempo with her feet, hurtling toward Sylvia, buoyed by her intensifying dance.

"Merua Lacasa!"

"If thoughts alone can't reach you, if wishes alone aren't enough—"

Sylvia, however, continued to sing, her song boosting her physical abilities as far as they would go.

With a sudden flash, Nefer's fist and Sylvia's Fólkvangr collided, the two of them practically switching places.

"—then I'll go beyond my limits. I'll keep pushing on!"

Her perfect voice reverberated throughout the arena, when—

"Neithnefer, crest broken."

"End of battle! Winner: Sylvia Lyyneheym!"

The automated voice began to ring out as if in accompaniment but was quickly drowned out by the roaring cheers of the audience.

"Phew…"

Before she knew it, Sylvia found herself sinking to the ground, letting out a tired sigh.

She had never before felt so drained after only one song.

“Just how did you get your rhythm back…?” Nefer asked, her expression sullen.

“I didn’t. I mean, it was far from perfect, right?”

She had resolved to use this new song of hers back in the last match, but even then, her pitch and timing hadn’t been as good as they could have been. If everything were to go perfectly in the future, the effects of the song on her physical strength would no doubt be more than double what they had been this time.

“I remembered something, is all: My songs aren’t just a means to an end… I’ve always used them to forge bonds with others. So I wasn’t fighting against your rhythm, Nefer; I accepted it… Well, not completely, I’ll admit, but still.”

Sylvia flashed Nefer a strained smile, but her defeated opponent remained as stern as ever.

“I see… I suppose we really aren’t compatible after all.”

And with that, she turned her back on Sylvia, heading toward the gate.

“Wait, Nefer!” the singer called out behind her. “Thank you. I feel like I’ve been able to take the next step forward now, thanks to you. It isn’t certain yet whether Orphelia will be my next opponent…but if she is, I’d like you to watch.”

The dancer came to a stop, standing in silence for a long moment, before finally responding:

“Very well. I’ll see just how far you can go.”

She departed the stage with those brusque words, not once looking back.

*

The chestnut brunette lay staring up at the ceiling from atop her bed.

How long, she wondered, had it been since she was first brought to this facility? A few months…? No, more like half a year. Completely cut off from the outside world, she had no way to accurately measure the passage of time. At first, she had tried to count the number of meals brought to her, but there were times when she went without due to the numerous tests she was subjected to, and others when she found herself sleeping for long periods as a side effect of the medicine they gave her, so she had long since lost track.

She had been given a nondescript private room, but for someone who had grown up in an orphanage living shoulder to shoulder with more people than she could count, she had more space now than she knew what to do with. She took three meals a day, and apart from not being able to leave her room, her life wasn’t particularly difficult. For someone whose rights had been completely sold off, her treatment

was better than might have been expected. If there was anything to complain about, it was the sheer monotony of her surroundings—she didn't have so much as a single flower to decorate her room.

She had decided that no matter what happened to her, she would have no regrets. When she had learned that the orphanage's debts had become so vast that some of the children would be taken as payment, she had put her own name forward. After all, she couldn't let any of the younger children be taken, and those older than herself had already begun to earn money to contribute to the others. All she knew how to do, though, was take care of the flowers and plants. And so, she had reasoned, it wouldn't be a huge burden on everyone else if she were to disappear.

"I do wish I'd been able to say good-bye to her, though…"

The face of her best friend, the naive young tomboy who often came to play with her at the orphanage, floated before her eyes. Whenever she found herself drifting off into her thoughts to pass the time, what came to mind wasn't the other children at the orphanage or the sisters who ran it, but rather her rose-haired friend. She may have been clumsy and stubborn, but she was also gentler and more earnest than anyone the chestnut brunette had ever met and would undoubtedly be consumed with sadness and rage by her disappearance. If she'd had even a few minutes before she'd left, she would have said something to soothe her friend. But now all she could do was pray that she had forgotten her and was living a healthy, peaceful life of her own.

After all, the girl knew she would never be able to leave this place. When she had first been brought to this facility, there had been many other children like herself. She didn't have direct contact with anyone else, but when she had been taken to other areas for tests and the like, she had always caught sight of others who looked to be in the same situation she was.

Recently, however, their number seemed to have decreased. Perhaps, she thought, the fact that her own tests and exams were becoming more frequent was a sign that there were fewer children available to them, no other subjects. But there was no way of knowing what had happened to them.

Besides, she would probably be joining them herself before long.

Just as her thoughts had taken her to that dark place, an air-window opened by the side of her room, and a voice devoid of emotion sounded through the room's speakers: *"Number Sixty-Six. Step outside."*

"…Yes."

She sat up as instructed and stepped down from the bed. It was impossible to know when she would be called on. Sometimes they

woke her up in the middle of the night, so today wasn't too bad.

Outside the room, she was met by several young women dressed in white lab coats who worked for the facility.

"We're transferring you. Follow me," one of them said curtly, before leading the way.

The girl followed the woman as ordered, but it wasn't long before they entered an unfamiliar section of the facility.

"You said I'm being transferred…but where?" she asked nervously, but there was no response.

Eventually, they came to a large door, beyond which was what looked like an airfield with a small airship in its center.

It was her first time outside in she didn't know how long, and the chill air cut to her bones. It looked like winter. The skies were overcast, the cold, blustery wind disheveling her hair.

And then—

A young woman standing in front of the airship, of a similar age to the staff who had led her out here, flashed her a grin full of sharp, pointed teeth.

"Kee-hee-hee-hee! Congratulations, Orphelia Landlufen! You have been chosen! By me! Come along, now! We're going to my little fortress in Geneva… Now, to open the door to progress!"

At the Sirius Dome—

"Making her way through the east gate is Allekant Académie's Hilda Jane Rowlands! Back in the preliminaries, Contestant Rowlands surprised us all by single-handedly destroying the urm-manadite core of an Orga Lux, but I wonder how that raw power of hers will fare against our reigning champion."

"A confrontation between these two exceptional contestants is certainly a fitting way to tie up the fifth round. To be honest, I can't really guess who will come out on top here. Given that she's also wielding an Orga Lux, I would normally say that Orphelia Landlufen has the edge here, and yet…"

Sparing a wave and a smile for the cheering crowds, Hilda slowly made her way across the bridge leading to the stage.

With each step, she came closer to transforming her dreams into reality, to forging the way forward into a new world.

She couldn't help but chuckle to herself as she used her newfound ability to slowly lower herself onto the stage.

Waiting for her with her distinctive white hair and bloodred eyes, her bearing radiating sadness and resignation, was the supposed strongest Strega in all of recorded history.

"Kee-hee-hee-hee! Dear me, if it hasn't been a long time since we've seen each other face-to-face, Orphelia Landlufen. You look

well."

"…" Orphelia, however, didn't respond to Hilda's greeting.

"Oh, this won't do. I'm practically your mother, in a way—the one who brought you back into this world. Aren't you happy to see me?"

Only after Hilda pulled an exaggerated mournful face of her own did Orphelia finally respond: "You're no one to me… You're the same as all the other poor souls whose fate has brought them before me: my opponent. That is all."

"Kee-hee-hee-hee! Fate, you say…? I never did quite follow what you were getting at, but now that I've been able to catch a glimpse of the other side, just like you have, I think I'm starting to get the picture."

At this, Orphelia's eyebrow twitched. "I see… So you've thrown yourself into the waters of fate. How foolish."

"Foolish? What's foolish about it? Is there any other way to experience it? To touch that world brimming with wisdom that transcends our own understanding? A universe where gods exist? Even if only for an instant, who wouldn't want to glimpse that bounty for themselves?"

The other side—the origin of mana.

A world unlike her own. The cosmic abode of the gods.

In the middle of her mana acceleration experiment, Hilda had seen it for herself and had felt its will.

And yet the wall separating their two worlds was still insurmountable. At their current rate, it would be centuries at least before mankind learned how to overcome it. And that was as good as worthless, as far as she was concerned. What mattered most to her was what she could do during this life.

"If you can still say that after seeing it with your own eyes…then there really is something wrong with you."

"Ooh, is that a compliment? Kee-hee-hee-hee! Excellent… But that won't do, not at all. Oh dear, would you look at the time? I've let myself get carried away, and we haven't even gotten to the main event yet. Why don't we pick up this conversation while we duel?"

After all, the match was due to begin in only a few moments.

"…I have nothing to discuss with you."

"Kee-hee-hee-hee! There's no need for that. I doubt all these people will understand us, but let's make it a fun battle!"

And with that, the two of them returned to their respective starting positions, and the automated voice rang out:

"Round 5, Match 8—begin!"

No sooner did the match get under way than shimmering tendrils

of poison miasma emerged from the ground at Orphelia's feet, rising into the air like smoke.

Hilda merely stood there with her arms crossed, watching with a composed demeanor.

There was no need to rush. After all, this wasn't the kind of opponent who would launch into a surprise attack.

"Right, there *was* something I've been meaning to ask you…," she began when the timing felt right, simultaneously unleashing her raw *power*.

With her tendrils of miasma, Orphelia pushed clean past that invisible mass of energy, altering its trajectory and bringing it crashing to the ground behind her with a massive impact. Unperturbed, Hilda created a second, then a third mass of power, but Orphelia effortlessly brushed them all aside.

"Do you hate me, maybe…? Look, I may be a genius, but I've never really been good at reading other people's thoughts. If *I* had been given what you have, I'd be thankful, not angry… But how about you?"

As she spoke, Hilda accelerated yet more barrages of concentrated power—but Orphelia merely increased the intensity of her miasma, its rapidly multiplying tendrils swatting them away one by one.

"No. I don't hate you, nor I am grateful. I just feel…sorry for you."

With a violent burst of energy, Hilda shook off the arms of miasma that had come writhing toward her, slamming them down hard—and continued to increase the force she was exerting on them until they literally melted into the ground. Their twin abilities, it seemed, had canceled each other out.

"Kee-hee-hee-hee! I see, I see! I can't say I've ever really understood sympathy, either, but let's put that aside. If you don't hate me, then why did you leave?"

As the two of them addressed each other from across the stage, their back-and-forth with their powers only continued to increase in speed and intensity.

"…Because it was my fate."

"That's just it, right there. I don't mind that you've become such a fatalist, but you can't put every little thing down to that same stale explanation. I'll admit, it was our fault you went wild like that and ran off to Solnage. But you could have done literally anything after that. You could have taken your freedom. You could have even returned to that little orphanage of yours… Then again, I suppose the fact that you couldn't control your miasma meant that most people wouldn't want to accept you… But why on earth did you go and become Dirk Eberwein's puppet? That's what I can't understand."

As they spoke, power collided with miasma, the twin forces

viciously tearing into each other. While the audience may have been unable to witness the true extent of the exchange, the trembling of the air, the rapidly blowing wind, and the sparks of purple lightning that shot across the stage as their abilities interfered with one another were visible to all.

"Wh-what's going on here?! I've never seen anything like this! Is this the ferocity we should have expected pitting two Stregas of their unique abilities against each other? The stage looks like it's collapsing around them! The defensive field is practically screaming under the pressure! And neither *one of our contestants has so much as* moved *from their starting positions!"*

"The microphones are switched off, so we can't pick up what they're saying, but they certainly look like they're discussing something down there. Don't tell me they're both still just warming up…"

The basic principle underlying both Hilda's and Orphelia's abilities was one and the same, the only difference lying in how much energy they could manifest and what they did with it. Which meant that if they kept throwing barbs at each other from this distance, it was highly unlikely that either would be able to gain the upper hand.

But that was fine.

"I don't serve Dirk Eberwein. I'm following my fate. Dirk Eberwein simply gave me the freedom to accept it. That's why I'm with him…with them."

"Huh? What a load of nonsense! You possess all that power, and you're happy just letting yourself be used by others? You're happy surrendering your free will, giving up on everything, and wallowing in melancholy? You're nothing more than an escapist, unable to face reality!"

"…I'm surprised to hear that from *you*."

A hint of wrath seemed to work its way into Orphelia's voice, and a huge, billowing arm of miasma materialized overhead a moment later, descending as if to crush her. But Hilda pushed it aside with a concentrated flow of power.

"Kee-hee-hee-hee! What's this? So there's still some humanity left in you after all? But that's no worry at all. And a bit of a relief. After all, you were just a prototype. Now that I've perfected the process with myself, there's only one task left for you: to lose to me, as proof of my superiority!" Hilda raised both arms into the air as she finished speaking, directing an enormous flow of energy toward Orphelia.

"Kur nu Gia."

Orphelia brought her tendrils of miasma together, before sending them flying directly toward her opponent.

Midway between the two opponents, the turbid flow of power collided head-on with those arms of miasma, the two forces struggling

against one another. It was a contest of raw strength, so powerful that even the air in the center of the stage was warping under the pressure.

However, it was becoming increasingly clear that unless something were to change, neither would emerge victorious. After all, both Orphelia and Hilda possessed literally unlimited supplies of prana.

Originally, the ultimate goal of Hilda's Hercules Project had been the creation of artificial Genestella. That was based on her theory that Genestella weren't humans who had adapted to the presence of mana, but rather those who had been transformed by it. If her theory was correct, she had reasoned, then it shouldn't have been beyond the realm of possibility to create a Genestella *a posteriori*. Of course, there was no way that could be accomplished with the amount of mana normally present in the natural world—and so, through repeated trial and error, she had finally determined that exposing a child who hadn't yet fully developed to a high energy state with a mana accelerator for a prolonged period of time was the most promising solution. A considerable number of individuals had been expended in the pursuit of that project, but thanks to her persistence, she had finally realized her first success: Orphelia. The only thing that had come as a surprise, excepting of course Orphelia's own unique nature, was the fact that she had been overflowing with seemingly infinite prana. And it was this unexpected side effect that had prompted Hilda's next hypothesis.

It was common knowledge that mana had been brought to the Earth during the Invertia, but it was as yet unclear precisely how much now existed there. That was because the total amount visible to the sensors of scientists like herself seemed to increase with each passing year. In an attempt to explain this phenomenon, some researchers had theorized that the Invertia meteorites had opened one or more *holes* to another place and that it was through these holes that mana emerged. No one, however, had yet directly observed such a thing.

Perhaps, Hilda wondered, her experiment had inadvertently reproduced the same phenomenon? It would, of course, have been much smaller in scale than the ones opened by the Invertia, but the effects seemed to be remarkably similar. Mana and prana had always had a close affinity with one another—although the prevailing view was that prana was the effect of changes brought about by mana acting on the human body. If one were to synthesize these various hypotheses, the logical assumption was that a *hole* had been opened in Orphelia's body and the mana flowing out of it was being converted into prana.

And when she had carried out the experiment once more using herself as the test subject, Hilda's hunch had developed into certainty.

She still hadn't been able to observe any of these *holes* with her equipment, but she had unquestionably felt them inside her. It seemed that these *holes* weren't something that existed within her physical body, but rather were linked to what made her *her*.

In short, both Hilda and Orphelia possessed unlimited prana. And if they could both pour an endless stream of energy into their attacks, in theory, at least, the contest could go on forever—although in all likelihood, the stage would collapse around them first.

That, however, was still just a theory.

In any event, Hilda was certain she had found a way to break the equilibrium long before the stage risked being demolished.

And at that moment—

"Ugh…"

Pain wormed its way onto Orphelia's anguish-ridden countenance as she stumbled, losing her balance.

With that, her poison tendrils broke through Hilda's torrent of energy, completely dispersing it.

Like a river breaking its banks, unseen energy began to surge uncontrollably—but no sooner did it do so than Orphelia activated the Gravisheath, using the Orga Lux to dam the flow as she retreated to the back of the stage.

"Wh-what a development! Has Contestant Rowlands just emerged as the victor in this trial of strength?! No, hold on! More importantly, did she just make our reigning champion flinch?!"

"Impossible… How can anyone be on the same level as Orphelia Landlufen…?"

"Kee-hee-hee-hee! What do you think, Witch of Solitary Venom? I can't say you look well!" Hilda called out, her tone of voice almost mocking.

There was no question that Orphelia was more than worthy of her reputation as one of the strongest, if not the strongest, Stregas of all time. However, Hilda, who possessed perhaps the most detailed data on her in existence, knew also that her body was unable to withstand all that power. She had no idea why her opponent's ability manifested itself in the form of miasma, but she knew that the poison was eating away at her flesh, too. Such an ailment could normally be controlled through medication, at least to some extent, but even so, if Orphelia maintained her previous level of output for too long, it would mean her own destruction. Hilda doubted her opponent would be able to use much more at all in her present condition.

She, on the other hand, wasn't held back by such a weakness.

"Do you understand now? You're irregular, a prototype. You can't hope to win against the perfected version."

"…"

Orphelia merely rose to her feet, staring down at the ground without responding.

But that was fine, too.

Hilda removed her broadsword-type Lux from its holder at her waist, activating it.

"Well then, let's finish this!"

And with that, she began to approach her opponent.

Aiming straight for her school crest, she struck upward with her blade, but Orphelia caught the blow with the Gravisheath. For a split second, the Orga Lux seemed to glow a pale shade of purple, but no sooner did Hilda notice that than a powerful force tried to crush her into the ground.

She jumped backward before that concentrated burst of gravity could hit her, circling around her opponent's left-hand side.

Orphelia may have been able to block her straightforward lurch with the Gravisheath, but Hilda still had the advantage when it came to speed and techniques. Bouncing back from a blocked overhead strike, she immediately launched into a chain of consecutive diagonal lunges.

"What a change in tempo! Who would have thought our contestants would go from that *to* this*?! And just look how strong Rowlands is!"*

"Her movements are something else… Ah, right! They're almost identical to those of the second-generation Master Swordsman Gilbert Premelin!"

Zaharoula certainly had a sharp eye. Hilda had decided not to make use of these techniques until now, in the fifth round. To begin with, they hadn't been necessary in her previous matches—but more than that, she had needed time to properly calibrate the Skill Installation Device. It had taken considerable effort, but she could now perfectly emulate the moves of the swordsman who had won the Lindvolus for himself back in his day.

Nonetheless, Orphelia, though generally thought to be less skilled at close combat, was handling her sword surprisingly well. Her close-combat performance in her championship match against Sylvia Lyyneheym at the previous Lindvolus hadn't been bad, but she had clearly improved considerably since then. If Hilda was being honest with herself, she hadn't anticipated this development.

On top of that, the Gravisheath was still a problem.

Whenever she tried to pull away in the midst of combat, an incredibly powerful weight seemed to fall upon her.

"Kee-hee-hee-hee! No matter what you do, victory will be mine!"

She caught the ball of pressure bearing down on her with her power, crushing it out of existence.

Orphelia, meanwhile, had retreated to a safe distance before

swinging the Gravisheath and sending a tsunami-like wave of gravity surging toward her. Not allowing herself to be flustered, however, Hilda aimed her blade right into the center of the oncoming deluge, carving it clean in two as it swept around her.

"You may be known as the strongest Strega in history, and you may have that Orga Lux of yours, but you're no match for me. On top of that…you don't seem to be very good at choosing your tools." Hilda broke into a wide smirk as she bent down. "The Gravisheath is certainly powerful for an Orga Lux, but frankly speaking, its cost is too high. Your poison blood may be able to force it to submit, but it's sheer stupidity to bleed yourself when you're already clearly so weakened. I can hardly think of a worse combination of variables."

Despite Hilda's words, however, Orphelia maintained her silence.

"Well, it doesn't really matter. Kee-hee-hee-hee!"

With that, Hilda launched once more into a close-range attack. The best strategy would undoubtedly have been to prolong their war of attrition and wait for Orphelia to tire, but Hilda's goal wasn't just to win. She wanted to overwhelm her opponent, to prove her own superiority and the perfection of her experiment. And to that end, she wanted to bring the match to a dramatic conclusion.

As Orphelia fought to keep her at bay with her weights of concentrated gravity, Hilda leaped within her range, releasing a sideways slash along with a burst of raw power.

Orphelia rapidly brought the Gravisheath around to block the attack, but she had no way of countering Hilda's burst of power. The blast was enough to send her tumbling backward through the air. No sooner did she come crashing to the ground than Hilda let loose with yet more masses of energy, but Orphelia saw it coming and broke into a run, dodging them all. The masses impacted behind her, carving huge swaths into the ground.

"Hmm… You're faster than I thought. But still!"

Hilda unleashed a wall of power toward her opponent, barring her movement.

Orphelia immediately spun around, trying to escape—but with a wave of Hilda's arms, the walls expanded, closing her in.

"Kee-hee-hee-hee! Like a rat in a trap!"

The woman brought her arms high into the air, before forcefully swinging them all the way down.

With Orphelia now trapped between those invisible walls, all that was left to do was crush her.

"…"

Her opponent stood in silence, perhaps having already resigned herself to her fate.

"Now for the finale!"

And yet—

"Huh…?"

At that moment, a wave of miasma swelled inside those invisible walls.

"Oh?"

In an instant, the walls exploded, the massed power she was bringing down on her opponent similarly thrown backward.

"…That's a little excessive, now," she murmured in shock. "Just play nice and let me get this over with. If you keep using your abilities in this state, you'll only make yourself suffer unnecessarily."

"…You understand nothing," Orphelia murmured, only now speaking. "It's impossible, no matter how much you want it. You don't understand your own fate." So saying, Orphelia plunged the Gravisheath into the ground in front of her. "Pain? Suffering? None of that matters. Even if my flesh were to melt or rot away, even if my blood were to run dry, it wouldn't change anything. *Small, inconsequential beings like you and I can't challenge fate*."

With a brilliant flash, a deep-purple light ran all the way through the stage.

"—?! No…!"

Hilda's intuition alerted her to the danger. She leaped high into the air, using her power to hold herself in place.

"Geshti Nanna."

With those words from Orphelia, a torrent of miasma erupted from the stage, immediately filling the entire field. It was as if an ancient forest that had lain dormant underground for years on end were slowly growing into untold thousands of trees all bristling up against one another. In short, it was impossible to resist.

"K—! Kee-hee-hee-hee! Th-this is incredible!"

Using her power to create footholds beneath her, Hilda continued to leap yet farther into the air, but the writhing branches of miasma below her kept snatching them away from her almost as soon as she could create them.

Faced with no other option, she pushed back against the roiling mass below in an attempt to contain it.

"Ngah?!"

Having climbed as high as she could go, she found herself slamming headfirst into the ceiling of the protective gel that encased the stage. Since the protective gel absorbed the impact, she suffered little damage from the collision. Orphelia's attack, however, was another matter.

"Ah… Ah… Aaaaaaaaaah!" A deep-rooted scream surged from her as unbearable pain coursed through her body.

As the miasma dissipated, Hilda found herself plummeting toward

the ground. She used her power to cushion her fall just before she landed, but that was as much as she could muster. She could barely even concentrate.

Orphelia slowly approached as Hilda lay facedown on the ground.

"…This poison only inflicts pain. You won't die."

"K—! Kee-hee-hee-hee! I think I would rather die than suffer this…! But…more importantly!" Though gasping in agony, she managed to pull herself up to lock eyes with her victorious opponent. "Your…your power… You've added your own abilities to your Orga Lux, haven't you?! Kee-hee! Kee-hee-hee-hee! Wonderful! Who would have imagined?! Aaaaaah! It hurts! The pain!"

Orphelia merely stared down at her, her crimson eyes filled with pity.

And then, at her feet—directly in front of her—a thick tendril of miasma rose from the ground, so frail that it could have been the arm of a newborn.

"This poison mirrors the effects of prana depletion. It isn't life-threatening, but the greater your amount of prana, the stronger and longer the result. To someone like you, with unlimited prana…I wonder what it will do?"

"Kee-hee-hee! Kee-hee-hee-hee! I see! So it's revenge! Aaaaahhhhh! Wh-what a shame! I still have to…! I still haven't…!"

"…Sleep, Hilda Jane Rowlands."

With those words, the pain gripping her body relented—and she descended into pitch blackness.

CHAPTER 6
ENCOUNTERS

"*Tch!* Did you come here to gloat, Julis?"

No sooner had he raised himself from his hospital bed and caught sight of his visitor than Lester's face turned sour.

"I thought I'd offer some words of comfort…but you sound well enough. Maybe I shouldn't have worried?"

"Quit screwing with me!"

"I'm joking, of course. I was pretty badly beaten up myself during my last match, so I thought I'd drop by, seeing as I was here anyway," Julis said, lifting her bandage-wrapped right arm for him to see.

The painkillers were supposed to have completely numbed her injuries, but she could still feel a dull throbbing coursing through her flesh. Given that the bone was broken, though, that probably couldn't be helped.

On top of that, her whole body was riddled with more cuts and bruises than she could possibly count. Still, she had to admit, that was a small price to pay for having defeated Xiaohui Wu.

"Hmph! You must be pretty pleased to have made it through to the next round! I, on the other hand…" Lester stopped there, turning his head away from her.

"What are you talking about? You won yours, too."

Julis had meant to console him, but she couldn't say she didn't understand his feelings.

"What's the point of winning if I can't even make it to the next match?!" he bellowed in anger.

Lester had only barely won his fifth-round match against the Black Knight earlier that day, and he had lost consciousness immediately afterward. After he was brought to the hospital, the director, Jan Korbel, had decided that he required special treatment by someone with healing abilities.

As a general rule, any Festa entrant whose wounds were treated by a healer was automatically disqualified from the tournament.

While strictly speaking, the decision was always subject to the will of the Executive Committee, it was fair to say that there were hardly any exceptions.

In other words, Lester had been left unable to participate in his quarterfinal match, despite having won his previous one.

Incidentally, while Claudia had received treatment from a healer in the middle of the previous Gryps, the injuries she had sustained then weren't received in the course of the tournament, so the Executive Committee had been willing to look the other way. After all, there were plenty of other ways penalties could be levied.

"Damn it! You can't just go around doing whatever the hell you want to people!"

"Don't say that… They wouldn't have used a healer if you didn't need one."

Healers were only used in exceptional circumstances. Even if someone wanted help, treatment wouldn't be offered unless the patient's wounds were life-threatening.

"That's easy enough for you to say, Julis! You've basically just won your next match by default! I'll bet you're happy!"

"Well, it is a stroke of luck."

Julis knew Lester was merely venting his anger on her, but she nonetheless nodded along to him with a reserved smile. After all, if he hadn't been disqualified, the two of them would be facing each other in the quarterfinals.

"Why, you…!" Lester glared at her, his expression screaming death.

Julis paid him no mind as she continued: "As you can see, I'm not in good shape, either. Winning by default is probably the best thing that could happen to me right now. However…if we were to fight each other, both of us at our full strength, the result wouldn't be any different. I would still win."

"Tch!" Lester's face turned red with anger as he tried to push himself up on his bed, but it wasn't long before he raised his hand to his chest, groaning in pain.

"Good grief… Here I was thinking you'd matured a little, but you're as impulsive as ever. You almost died out there, so just lie back and get some rest, won't you?" With this, Julis turned her back on him. "You'll probably just say you don't believe me, though, so I'll prove it to you. When the Lindvolus is over."

"What…?"

"I'm saying that I'll challenge you in an official ranking match. So…don't get too discouraged."

Julis headed for the exit without even looking back.

"What…? Wait, Julis! Did you honestly come here to try to make

me feel better, or—" Lester called after her in confusion, but Julis closed the door behind her, not bothering to wait for him to finish.

And then—

"Dear me… You *do* like to tease, don't you, Julis?"

Claudia stood a little down the corridor, as if she had been waiting for her all along, and winked at her in jest.

"…That's not it. This was about what *I* needed," Julis responded somewhat awkwardly, averting her gaze.

Julis had watched the recording of Lester's match after her own had finished and couldn't help but be impressed by his performance. But what had struck her so profoundly wasn't *that* so much as his sheer tenacity, his unrelenting drive to win. In a way, he reminded her of herself.

"Enough about me. What are you doing here?"

"Even if he can't compete in the quarterfinals, MacPhail has certainly made a considerable contribution to our academy's standing. As student council president, it's only natural for me to thank him for his efforts, no?"

Right. A full half of the eight contestants who had made it through to the quarterfinals represented Seidoukan Academy—which meant that, no matter how the tournament ended, the school had already acquired enough points to secure its victory for the present cycle. Even if every one of Seidoukan's remaining fighters was to lose in the quarterfinals (although given that Julis would have faced Lester, one of them would have made it through to the next round), and even if Fuyuka Umenokouji took the championship for Jie Long, currently in second place, Seidoukan would still win overall.

"Of course, we're very grateful to you as well, Julis. Thank you."

"I don't need your thanks," Julis said, before continuing down the hallway toward the exit, when Claudia called out behind her, her voice tinged with sadness:

"Wait. We all know that you're wrestling with some kind of situation. And that you can't share it with anyone. But in spite of that…isn't there anything we can do to help you…? As friends?"

"…" Julis bit her lip, slowly shaking her head. "You can hurry up and do something to help *him*—and his sister," she squeezed out, before hastily making her departure.

In a special room in a separate section of the hospital, Allekant Académie's Magnum Opus, Hilda Jane Rowlands, lay motionless in the center of her bed—and next to her stood a figure, or more appropriately, an Orga Lux.

"I thought to use you as insurance for when Madiath's plan fails… but it looks like you met your downfall first," murmured that Orga

Lux, the Varda-Vaos, as she stared at Hilda's sleeping countenance.

The poison Orphelia had used against her was acting directly on her prana. Neutralizing it would undoubtedly prove difficult even for Jan Korbel. On top of that, Hilda possessed several *holes*. Not even Varda could estimate when she might awaken. It might take only a few days, but it might also take ten or even twenty years.

"We can't afford to wait for you. I'm going to have to settle our accounts now."

With that, Varda began to adjust Hilda's memories, sorting through her accumulated knowledge.

They might not be of much immediate use, but it would be a shame for the results of her research to be completely forgotten.

And they might one day help Varda accomplish her own true goals.

"…Well, we won't need them if everything goes according to plan this time. Ah, human sentimentality can be such a nuisance."

Having taken everything she could, Varda breathed a quiet sigh, before disappearing back into the shadows.

*

At the Canopus Dome…

"—!"

"Hold on, you're… Right, right! Miss Saya Sasamiya!"

Saya had been hastily making her way through the corridors of the Canopus Dome when a woman dressed in a white lab coat appeared before her.

"…Ernesta Kühne."

Her next opponent, albeit in name only.

Behind her, a small figure came strolling down the hallway with a bounce in her step.

"Huh? Hey, hey, Mom! Is this that person you were talking about, the one Lena gets to fight soon?"

It was Lenaty, Ernesta's newest autonomous puppet, and Saya's actual next opponent.

"It is. Do you remember watching the recording of her last match?"

"Yep, Lena remembers her! But if that's all she's got, it's gonna be a piece of cake! Nee-hee-hee!" Lenaty broke out into an innocent laugh, hiding her mouth behind her hand.

"Hmph! Your little brat sure knows how to introduce herself."

"Huh?! Lena's not a brat!"

"Heh-heh, only a brat would get upset over something as little as that."

"*Argh!* You're one to talk! Just look how little your breasts are!"

"*Ngh!* How rude… I've got a much nicer body than you do."

"Lena can her change her body! So there!"

"Well, I'm still growing. Why don't you try to calculate what I'll look like in a few years' time? You'll be in for a bit of a shock."

"Hrmmmmmph!"

"Mmmmmmrrn!"

Saya and Lenaty both stepped forward, glaring fiercely at one another and about to butt heads.

"Ah, why don't we leave it at that, you two?" Ernesta said, separating them, her expression one of exaggerated surprise. "By the way, what brings you to the Canopus Dome, Saya? And here I was thinking your match was down at the Capella Dome."

"That's…" Pulling herself away from Lenaty, Saya cast her gaze to the far side of the corridor.

"…Ah, I see. So that's it."

It seemed that was enough for Ernesta to get a handle on the situation.

"You know, Camilla talks about you a lot. I've been absent a bit since our match at the Phoenix, but I hear you two have developed quite the relationship."

"…You make it sound like we're lovers. I only discuss technical matters with her when she comes to Seidoukan to work on the Rect Luxes. She's my…rival. We've got a score to settle."

"Sorry, my apologies. I meant nothing by it. It's just, well…given the situation, I'm not in much of a position to comfort her." Ernesta paused there, staring at the ground. There was a hint of loneliness in her voice.

"…I'm surprised. I didn't know you were capable of caring for others."

"Oh dear, you *are* rude! Well, I can't really deny it, but I do try to do what I can for my one true friend." She may have been trying to make it look like she was joking, but Saya suspected she meant what she said.

Saya knew also what she meant by *what I can*. No matter how much she cared for Camilla, Ernesta was the kind of person who would put that friendship aside to pursue her own dreams and ambitions without a second thought.

"Well then, all the best." With a wave of her hand, Ernesta set off down the corridor.

"Nyehhh! Lena's going to crush you tomorrow!" Lenaty added, sticking her tongue out at her before running off after her creator.

Saya fell deep into thought for a brief moment, before calling after her: "Wait, Ernesta Kühne."

She didn't know how far it was wise to pry, but this was a one-in-a-thousand chance.

"Yes?" Ernesta spun around. "What is it?"

There was only one thing for it—Saya would put it to her point-blank.

"Why are you helping the Golden Bough Alliance?"

"!" Ernesta's eyes opened wide in surprise but quickly narrowed, catlike, as she gave a demure smile. "My, what do you mean? I'm afraid I don't have the faintest idea what you're talking about."

"…I see. Forget about it."

Liar…

Saya had a hard time reading Ernesta, given her often flippant attitude, but it was clear enough that she wasn't telling the truth now.

"Well then, bye-bye."

Saya glared after Ernesta as she disappeared down the corridor, only allowing herself to relax once she was completely out of sight. Letting out a deep sigh, she pulled out her mobile and sent Claudia a message to tell her what had just happened.

With that, she pulled herself together and set off once more down the corridor to Camilla's prep room.

No sooner did she knock on the door than an air-window popped open before her.

"Who is it?"

"Me" was all she said, but the door nonetheless slid open.

"I'm a little tied down at the moment. Just take a seat over there somewhere."

In the center of her prep room, Camilla was busy repairing Rimcy, completely surrounded by spare pieces and equipment.

"You don't need to do it all here, you know…"

"This is just a bit of first-aid. The damage was severe. She can't even move by herself. I can't get her to the lab without pulling her apart." Camilla's sentences were short and to the point. She didn't even glance over her shoulder toward her visitor.

Saya said nothing, merely watching as she worked.

Rimcy, perhaps deactivated, was similarly silent.

The only sound echoing through the prep room was that of Camilla working with her various components.

Only after Saya had lost all track of time did Camilla speak up: "I'm sorry. I couldn't keep our promise. To settle everything between us during the tournament."

"You don't need to apologize."

In a different reality, it might have been Saya who had been defeated.

"We can face each other any time you want…"

“No, it’s over,” Camilla answered despondently.

“What…do you mean?” Saya asked, raising an eyebrow in confusion.

Only then, for the first time since Saya had arrived, did Camilla put down her tools. “I’ve… We’ve lost. Rimcy accepts it as much as I do.”

“Indeed. Master Camilla is correct.” Rimcy’s voice—proving that she was in fact awake—was devoid of emotion.

“It was Ernesta Kühne and Lenaty who beat you, not me. That shouldn’t change anything between us.”

“That’s true. And yet…it made me realize all over again just how much less talented I am.”

“Talented?”

“You saw the match, right? Between Rimcy and Lenaty?”

As Saya nodded, Camilla shook her head, her lips twisting in a self-deprecating smile.

“Controlling the urm-manadite core with the LOBOS transition method… The fact that Ernesta thought to do that in the first place shows just how extraordinary she is. But it’s not just that. The worst of it is that even with all the data staring right at me, I couldn’t see through it…”

“Your area of expertise is Luxes, not puppets. So—”

“So what? There’s no helping it? Maybe you’re right. But I’ve been working with her for years. I can’t forgive myself that easily. And then there’s that thing you used in your match…the S-Module, was it?”

Saya had touched on her new creation during her winner’s interview. Perhaps, she thought, Camilla had been tuning in.

“That idea is just as extraordinary as Ernesta’s. It’s beyond my reach.”

“I concur. As a mere tool, I cannot comment on Master Camilla’s talent, but at the very least, I am no match for Lenaty. I couldn’t even satisfy her in battle. But you, Saya Sasamiya…I believe you can. And so I admit defeat.”

“…I see.” Having listened to their explanations, Saya, arms crossed, nodded. “I understand what you’re trying to say. *But so what?*”

“Huh…?”

“I just want to settle our score because I’m not happy with the way we left things. That’s all.”

Both Camilla and Rimcy stared back at her blankly.

“Talented, undefeatable opponents? I’m surrounded by more than enough of those. A beautiful *tsundere* princess with a wickedly nice body; a sword-fighting prodigy who always acts like a small, frightened animal; and don’t forget the world’s top idol. I want to tell

them all to just shut up sometimes. I *do* tell them: *Just cut it out, already!*"

"Huh? Sasamiya…? What are you…?"

"But me, I'm short and underdeveloped, I wouldn't stand a chance against them in battle, and even when I want to help people, there are so many things that are just beyond me. But that's why I'm never going to give up. I couldn't live with myself. And that's got nothing to do with how I feel about Ayato. Because my heart belongs to me, and I'm not going to compare it to others'."

"…!"

"That's why… But, uh, wait," Saya murmured. "What were we talking about, again?" She seemed to have gone quite a bit off topic. "Anyway, what I'm saying is—"

"It's okay," Camilla chuckled, holding a hand in the air to urge her to stop. "I understand. You're right, of course. It isn't fair for me to just give up after everything that's happened. I take back what I said."

"As do I," Rimcy concurred, exchanging a glance with her creator. "I shudder to think how that wooden blockhead must be laughing at me right now."

"Good." Saya nodded in satisfaction before continuing: "By the way… The way I see it, your talents are in no way second to Ernesta Kühne's."

"…If you're trying to make me feel better, it's not necessary."

"It's the truth. You've got a different kind of talent. Hers is the kind that pushes the world forward—yours is the kind that stabilizes it, that makes it a safer place. Sure, the former is important, but sometimes it's dangerous to rush too far ahead."

"Rushing too far ahead…," Camilla repeated in apparent realization, with an expression that looked as if she had bitten down on a dozen bitter-tasting bugs.

"Me and my dad probably fall into that category, too. That's why most of the things we put together are pretty unbalanced. So maybe you weren't exactly wrong when you said what you did when we first met. Not that I'm going to admit that, though."

For her, *that* was a matter of pride.

"And as for my S-Module, it's still not finished. I had no idea when it would blow up. If you had designed it, it'd probably be a lot more stable."

"…Why would you wield something so fragile? But now that you mention it, it *did* look somewhat uneven when you first activated it. Wouldn't that suggest a problem with the central core?"

"Hmm, you've got a good eye. Actually…" Saya brought up the data on the S-Module with her mobile, when her hand suddenly fell still. After all, Camilla belonged to Allekant Académie, one of her rival

schools, and despite everything remained good friends with her next opponent, Ernesta Kühne. If she were acting logically, it would be unthinkable for her to share this data.

And yet…

"…Why not?" she whispered to herself, passing her mobile along.

"I don't know how I'm going to repay you," Camilla said as she looked over the data.

"Um, Master Camilla… Please don't forget about me," murmured Rimcy, watching from the sidelines, her hesitant voice nonetheless containing a hint of happiness.

*

Xinglou sat perched upon her throne in the audience chamber at Jie Long Seventh Institute's Hall of the Yellow Dragon.

"Have you finished your detox, Xiaohui?" she asked.

Xiaohui, kneeling before her, answered simply: "Yes."

"It was a shame how your match ended."

"I regret that I failed to meet your expectations, Master. It pains me to think how much I have yet to learn."

"Oh-ho! Don't look so troubled, Xiaohui! I'm very satisfied. Yes indeed. More satisfied than I've been in a long, long time." Xinglou paused there, clapping her hands in delight as if to illustrate her point, before leaning forward and fixing him with a broad grin. "You've acquired new skills, I see. Your Al-Najmiya is truly impressive. I've known about ways of adjusting one's prana, but I've never dabbled in such techniques myself. It doesn't meld well with transmigration, you see."

"…So I've been told."

Indeed, the old man from whom Xiaohui had learned Al-Najmiya was a longtime acquaintance of Xinglou's. It was pure chance that had led Xiaohui to him—or rather, that had led the master of Al-Najmiya to Xiaohui when he had been lost deep in the forests of Europe.

"What's all this now? Here I was thinking that a promising young fellow had finally crossed the barrier, but you're that witch's student. You shouldn't get an old man's hopes up like that… Begone! Begone now!"

Xiaohui recalled the moment when the old master of Al-Najmiya had appeared, specterlike amid the dense fog-laden woodland, as if he were standing directly in front of him. His body had been unusually thin, like a withered tree; he had a long white mustache; and he was dressed in a ragged, worn robe, looking for all the world like a sorcerer stepping out of an ancient fairy tale.

He appeared as an apparition, with Xiaohui able to see partly through him to the treescape beyond. At first, he had thought the man

was using some kind of illusion technique, but he quickly realized just how mistaken that assumption was. As difficult as it was to believe, the old man had left his physical body behind and had transferred his consciousness into nothing less than raw prana.

"He is one of those who have chosen to remain in this world for longer than his time, though in a way unlike myself. You might say that he's similar to those beings on the other side that we know as gods. Although he's rather stunted compared to them. Oh-ho!" Xinglou's gaze became unusually nostalgic, as if she were talking about an old friend. "He's gone a bit senile, though, and he was always more than a little eccentric. You did well to scrape together what you could of his secrets. He isn't much of a teacher."

"I am grateful to him for allowing me to stay for as long as I did."

As it happened, the old man had never once revealed his name. In the realm of magic, names were said to be a source of power, so Xiaohui had always referred to him simply as the old man.

The old man had allowed him to remain in his hidden retreat on one condition—that Xiaohui work as his assistant. After all, while the old man possessed numerous mechanical dolls that saw to most of his necessities, the flesh-and-blood Xiaohui had been a great help to his experiments.

Indeed, the old man spent the majority of his days working away at experiments beyond Xiaohui's comprehension—experiments to discern the secrets of the world. At first, he had been unable to grasp even the smallest fragment of that knowledge, but after six months of faithfully carrying out the old man's instructions, he finally experienced a revelation—the way of optimizing his prana for various situations. It was a much less developed version of the technique the old man employed, but for Xiaohui, who had set out on his journey in pursuit of a new path, it was like divine guidance.

"You have probably realized this yourself by now, Xiaohui…but *you're weaker than you were before*. If you fought today as you had before you had left, I doubt you would have lost to Julis."

"I know."

He already knew Xinglou spoke the truth.

It wasn't a problem of strength or techniques. Physically and mentally, he was much stronger today than he had been then, and having discovered Al-Najmiya, his range of techniques had similarly broadened.

No, what had changed was his fighting style.

"Oh-ho! Good, good! It's like you've been reborn. Life itself is conflict, and you're in the middle of relearning everything from scratch. What do you think? Fighting, polishing your skills, pushing yourself to overcome your foes—it's exhilarating, wouldn't you say?

The old you paid no heed to your opponents. All you looked toward was me. So really, you were merely playing by yourself."

"It shames me to think about it now." Xiaohui, still kneeling before his master, lowered his head.

"No, it is one way. I won't deny that. But if you had stayed on that path, you would have forever remained my highest disciple." Xinglou paused there for a moment, nodding to herself. "However, you have left that path and stepped out into the wild unknown. I doubt you realize just how pleased I am to see that!"

"…I can't yet hope to surmise your feelings, Master. But I *will* prove myself worthy of you. I have engraved your words that day into my heart."

Xinglou's words—or rather, Xiaoyuan's—were as fresh now as they had been then.

"I will make you stronger, Xiaohui. Stronger, stronger, stronger, until one day you will be even stronger than I am… Satisfy me. That is all I wish from you."

If he was to ever fulfill his master's wish, Xiaohui knew, he wouldn't be able to remain her disciple forever. Strictly speaking, if all he wanted to do was equal her or move beyond her in her old age, he might be able to carry out the literal meaning of the words. But that level of arrogance wasn't worthy of Xinglou, the Ban'yuu Tenra.

And so he had vowed to surpass her by himself, to train and to learn until he could truly give her what she wanted.

"I swear to you, Master, that one day…one day I will not only stand shoulder to shoulder with you…I will surpass you."

"—!" At this declaration, Xinglou's small body began to quiver, until a look of utmost joy took over her face. "Oh-ho…! Oh-ho-ho-ho-ho! Wonderful! Ah, it makes my heart ache!" she exclaimed with elation, leaping down from her throne and wrapping her thin little arms around his neck.

"M-Master…?!"

"…You've become a fine young man, Xiaohui."

Her voice was deep and quiet and seeped all the way into his core.

And then, at the next moment—

"Pò!"

Xiaohui found himself being thrown backward through the air.

In that upside-down world, his eyes could focus on nothing but Xinglou's ferocious grin.

"I can't wait any longer! Let's have a go! I need a taste of that Al-Najmiya!" she cried as she launched herself through the air in a follow-up attack.

Xiaohui returned her buoyant grin, casting a spell charm to use as a foothold as he readied himself to defend. "As you wish!"

*

“Keeeee! I object! It’s not right!” came a loud squeal from the table at the back of the Macondo café.

“…Um, Violet? I need to be heading home soon.”

Minato, her chin resting in her hands as she watched Violet, sitting across from her, finish her giant parfait, let out a tired sigh.

“No! You need to stay with me until I feel better…! Um, Chelsea! Can we have another one of those special fruit parfaits?!”

“Coming right up! It’s nice to have customers at this hour! It’s normally so quiet around now!”

“Not another one…”

Unlike the good-humored Chelsea, even more cheerful than usual at the prospect of continued sales, Minato let her shoulders slump.

“I know you’re disappointed about losing, but I’m in the same boat you are… You’ve just got to accept it and move on to the next one, you know? I mean, you can’t just keep eating like this.”

“I don’t want to hear your logic right now! And don’t lump us together like that! You were eliminated in the fourth round! I made it all the way into the *fifth*!”

“Ah…”

There was no point going over it again.

Resigning herself to her fate, Minato opened the menu once more, hoping to find a parfait or some other sweet they hadn’t already tried, when the bell by the door sounded. It might have been nearly closing time, but by the looks of it, another customer had just entered the café.

“Welco—Huh?!” Chelsea’s shock seemed to echo throughout the whole room.

“What is it, Chel—*What?!*”

Wondering what had just happened, Minato turned around, only to find the person she would have least expected to see standing in the entrance.

“What’s going on? You were just… *Huuuuuuuuuuhhh!*”

Violet, the last to realize who had entered, let out a wild shriek, turning suddenly stiff.

“Ah, here you are. Sylvie said I might find you here.”

“Sorry to disturb you.”

The man staring warmly toward them—Ayato Amagiri—approached their table, along with a young woman Minato had never seen before. Judging by the young woman’s uniform, she was a member of the city guard.

“A-a-ah, Mister Amagiri…! Wh-wh-wh-wh-what are you doing here…?”

“Oh? Ah, you’re the girl Saya fought earlier today… Right, aren’t you two friends?”

“Ah, well, something like that…”

Violet, flustered, brushed her hands all over her hair and her face, which had turned completely scarlet. Minato decided to leave her as she was for a moment, turning instead to their visitor.

“C-congratulations on your match. I hope you weren’t too badly hurt?”

The word going around, after all, was that Ayato had sustained considerable injuries from his match against Le Wolfe’s Basadone, Rodolfo Zoppo.

“Thank you for asking. My right leg’s a little sore, but the other one’s okay.”

“You’re pretty lucky to have gotten off so lightly against that unwieldy Rect Lux,” said the woman in the Stjarnagarm uniform, patting him affectionately on the head.

Minato had no idea who she was, but judging by the familiarity of that action, they had to be very close…

“Um… Mister Amagiri… Who is this person…?”

“Ah, I meant to introduce myself. Nice to meet you, Minato. My name is Haruka. I’m Ayato’s sister.”

“What?! M-Mister Amagiri has a sister?! I-it’s a pleasure to meet you, too!”

Minato bowed her head in greeting, with Violet quickly following suit: “N-n-n-n-nice to meet you!”

“And you must be Violet. Your match with Saya was amazing. I was on the edge of my seat the whole time!” Haruka said.

“Right. We might have been put against one another if the bracket had been drawn differently. I wonder what would have happened then…,” Ayato added, nodding.

“Th-th-that’s…! I—I…!”

“And… Er, Violet… Do you know there’s cream on your nose?”

“Huh?! Ah, wh-why…?! Argh!”

Out of joy or embarrassment—or perhaps both—Violet’s face turned bright red, and she slumped down in her seat. She looked happy, so Minato decided to leave it at that.

“Um, er… Did you want me? I—I haven’t done anything wrong, if that’s what—”

“Huh? No, no, not at all. This is unrelated to my work with the city guard… Well, I suppose it isn’t *entirely* unrelated, but anyway. There’s something I want to ask you.”

“Me…?”

What on earth could it be?

“It’s…personal, and we don’t mean to intrude…,” Ayato began with an apologetic frown. “But we’d like you to tell us about the incident in which your father died.”

*

“Stop giving me the creeps, Orphelia. What the hell’s going on with you today?” Dirk spat out across the room aboard the airship flying high over Asterisk.

Orphelia, meanwhile, was staring out into the deep night sky, her eyes filled with characteristic melancholy. To Dirk, those eyes were no less nauseatingly unpleasant than they had been the first time he had met her.

“…Nothing. I just fought like I always do.”

“So she put up more of a fight than you were expecting, then?”

If Orphelia had gone all out from the beginning of her fifth-round match with Hilda, there would have been no need to prolong the struggle for as long as she had.

“Perhaps what we should be doing is praising Rowlands. In theory, at least, her power ought to have been the equal of that of our friend here,” Madiath, sitting directly across from him, interrupted.

Dirk clicked his tongue in annoyance. “*Tch!* Do you really have to butt in every single time someone says something? This was all about the fact that we stole this one from right under that lunatic scientist’s nose! Just how much do you think that cost us? Oh, but I’m sure you already know the answer to that!”

“But is that power not wearing down Orphelia’s life? If she were to die now, it would be *us* who would be most disadvantaged.” This time it was Varda, sitting to his right, who interjected.

“I’m not saying she should go and kill herself! It’s like each and every one of you just has to… Fine! She won! Let’s leave it at that!”

Dirk threw his arms into the air in disgust.

"Now then, let's move on to the matter at hand. After all, this will be the final meeting between us members of the Golden Bough Alliance," Madiath said with a clap. "And besides, it isn't every day that the princess joins us."

"Hah! Given how many times we've invited her, this really is a stroke of luck!"

At present, the Golden Bough Alliance was comprised solely of the three of them—Dirk, Madiath, and Varda. Orphelia was no more than their tool—but at the same time, she was also their master.

"Perhaps that is for the best. She does have every right to act against us, if she should so choose," Madiath said, spreading his hands dramatically as he adopted that flippant persona of his. "*In exchange for her life and honor and dignity, we've afforded her the right to relinquish everything, along with her absolute privileges over us.* That was our agreement."

Indeed, what he said was true. After her escape, Orphelia Landlufen had come into Dirk's care, and he had taken responsibility for her affairs when it had become clear that she had no desire to think for herself. He had no way of knowing what she had seen or felt from the other side, or why it had broken her the way it had, but he surmised that she sought a means of finding absolution. And if she could achieve that, it didn't matter *what* happened to her.

"…I came because there's something I forgot to tell you."

"Yeah? And what would that be?"

At this, Orphelia, looking grief-ridden and desolate, let out a tired sigh. "It's about your plan… I may have revealed some of it."

At that instant, the whole room suddenly stilled.

"Ah… Hold on a second. What did you just say?" Dirk asked with unusual calm as he scratched the side of his head.

"I told her…about the plan."

"Are you trying to screw with us?!" Dirk jumped to his feet, sending his chair tumbling behind him, drawing menacingly close.

He was fully aware that he couldn't touch her, unfortunately; otherwise he might very well have struck her down.

"…That is clearly treachery," Varda murmured, the Orga Lux hanging around her neck beginning to release an obsidian glow.

"Calm down, all of you," Madiath called, dousing the situation before it could truly ignite. His voice, however, betrayed the fact that he was just as incensed as the rest of them. "When exactly did this happen, Miss Orphelia?"

"…Around half a year ago, maybe?"

"Six months ago?!" Dirk's rage at hearing that she had remained silent for so long left him unable to so much as finish his sentence.

“And who did you tell?”

“Julis-Alexia von Riessfeld.”

“You didn’t mention it to anyone else?”

“No. Only her.”

“And what did you tell her?”

“Only my part in it. I don’t know any more than that. I don’t need to know any more than that.”

“And lastly… Why did you do it?”

At hearing this last question, Orphelia paused ever so briefly before responding: “I don’t really know. I did warn her not to tell anyone else, but why would I do that…? Yes, I probably wanted to test the strength of her resolution, and of her fate.”

“Hmm…”

Madiath crossed his arms, sinking deep into thought.

Dirk, meanwhile, brought his emotions back under control.

If he had known the plan had been leaked, he would have dealt with it a long time ago. Given Julis’s proximity to Claudia in particular, this could mean that Seidoukan knew more than they were letting on… But then, why would Madiath’s informants have failed to uncover the true depth of their knowledge?

No, it was more likely that Julis really had kept her silence.

“Is this supposed to be a threat, Orphelia?” he asked coolly.

“Even if the plan has been exposed, all we can do is move forward,” Varda noted. “There’s no point abandoning it now.”

“I won’t argue with that.” Dirk nodded in agreement.

Julis understood how strong Orphelia was, at least to an extent—which meant that she must also have known that she couldn’t possibly stop her.

“…What will we do about this, Madiath?” Varda asked.

“A good question… It doesn’t seem like this will pose much of a danger at present. Miss Riessfeld no doubt means to stop Orphelia herself. In which case, the problem will inevitably solve itself.”

Indeed, there was no way Julis would be able to defeat Orphelia.

However—

“We need to be *certain*. We don’t know what she’ll do when we put the plan into motion.”

“I agree with Dirk. We would be best eliminating this variable entirely,” added Varda.

“Hmm…” Madiath paused. “I would prefer not to aggravate the situation at this late hour, but if that is what is required…”

Orphelia turned her attention away from the bickering members of the Golden Bough Alliance, casting her gaze back out the window.

And then, the unsleeping nightscape of the city glimmering far

below her, she murmured to herself: “Today’s was a good match, Julis… I just have a few more trials waiting for you…”

AFTERWORD

Hi there. Yuu Miyazaki here.

I hope you've enjoyed the Lindvolus so far in Volumes 13 and 14. I originally planned to include all the events of these two volumes in the one book, but I quickly realized just how impossible that would be, so we've brought the volumes out back-to-back. Even then, I wanted to include everything up to the quarterfinals in this one, but that wasn't possible, either. Perhaps I should have put a bit more thought into it…

Anyway, I knew from the very beginning that I wanted this Lindvolus arc to be heavy on battles, so after talking it over with my editor, O, and okiura, we decided that it would be best to publish everything up to this point here. I tried to make each and every battle fun to read by itself, but I can't deny that it could end up getting a bit boring jumping straight from one to another. If you read everything at once, it ends up being like one long serial publication. Even with things the way they are, I've had to leave a few matches out (there are a lot of characters I wanted to focus more on, like Azumachi Ibara), but thanks to that, we've only got six matches left.

We'll be focusing more on the fight against the Golden Bough Alliance from here on out as well. The story as a whole will get more intense from now on, too, and Julis in particular has a cruel fate awaiting her, but please keep reading! Kirin was the only one of our main members who didn't make an appearance this time around, but I've got big plans for her in the next volume. I hope you're all looking forward to it as much as I am!

The main story might have already moved past that point, but I'm still planning to work on another volume of *The Wings of Queenvale* as well, so keep your eyes out for that one, too!

I put a lot of pressure on okiura this time, what with releasing two volumes over two months. But despite that, all I have are words of praise for the quality of his illustrations. On the cover we have Claudia and Ayato after their respective makeovers, while inside Xiaohui, Noelle, and the Black Knight all make full-color appearances. Xiaohui in particular was already completed back when the anime was

in production, but this is the first time we've been able to give him a proper public debut.

Last but not least, I'd like to express my thanks to everyone involved.

To my editor, O, for patiently sticking by me no matter how many times I find myself caught in a rut; to S for helping supervise Fuyuka's Kyoto dialect once more; to everyone at the editorial department who I keep inconveniencing at the last minute; to my many proofreaders; and of course, to my many readers for your continued support, I would like to express my most heartfelt thanks. I'm looking forward to seeing you all again with the next volume.

Yuu Miyazaki
March 2018

characters

SEIDOUKAN ACADEMY

SOUICHI SASAMIYA
Saya's father. Appears as a hologram after losing most of his body. Technical adviser for Seidoukan's Matériel Department.

SILAS NORMAN
A former companion of Lester's. Attacked Ayato with Allekant's backing but was defeated. Now a member of Seidoukan's intelligence organization Shadowstar.

ALLEKANT ACADÉMIE

SHUUMA SAKON
Student council president of Allekant Académie.

ERNESTA KÜHNE
Creator of Ardy and Rimcy.

CAMILLA PARETO
Ernesta's research partner.

ARDY (AR-D)—"ABSOLUTE REFUSAL" DEFENDED MODEL
Autonomous puppet. Fought alongside Rimcy during the Phoenix.

RIMCY (RM-C)—"RUINOUS MIGHT" CANNON MODEL
Autonomous puppet. Fought alongside Ardy during the Phoenix.

HILDA JANE ROWLANDS
One of the greatest geniuses in Allekant's history. Also known as the Great Scholar, Magnum Opus.

LE WOLFE BLACK INSTITUTE

DIRK EBERWEIN
Student council president of Le Wolfe Black Institute.

KORONA KASHIMARU
Secretary to Le Wolfe's student council president.

ORPHELIA LANDLUFEN
Two-time champion of the Lindvolus and the most powerful Strega in Asterisk.

IRENE URZAIZ
Priscilla's elder sister. Under Dirk's control. Alias the Vampire Princess, Lamiiexia.

PRISCILLA URZAIZ
Irene's younger sister. A regenerative.

WERNHER
A member of Grimalkin's Gold Eyes. Kidnapped Flora.

JIE LONG SEVENTH INSTITUTE

XINGLOU FAN
Jie Long's top-ranked fighter and student council president. Alias Immanent Heaven, Banyuu Tenra.

XIAOHUI WU
Jie Long's second-ranked fighter and Xinglou Fan's top disciple.

FUYUKA UMENOKOUJI
Jie Long's third-ranked fighter. Alias the Witch of Dharani.

characters

CECILY WONG
Hufeng Zhao's former tag partner, with whom she became a runner-up at the Phoenix.

HUFENG ZHAO
An exceptional martial artist often entrusted with secretarial tasks by Xinglou Fan, who always gives him something to worry about.

SHENYUN LI & SHENHUA LI
Twin brother and sister. Defeated by Ayato and Julis during the Phoenix.

ALEMA SEIYNG
Jie Long Seventh Institute's former number one, with overwhelming ability in martial arts.

SAINT GALLARDWORTH ACADEMY

ERNEST FAIRCLOUGH
Gallardworth's top-ranked fighter and student council president.

LAETITIA BLANCHARD
Gallardworth's second-ranked fighter and student council vice president.

PERCIVAL GARDNER
Gallardworth's fifth-ranked fighter and student council secretary.

LIONEL KARSH
Gallardworth's student council treasurer. A member of Team Lancelot.

KEVIN HOLST
Gallardworth's student council vice president. A member of Team Lancelot.

NOELLE MESSMER
Gallardworth's seventh-ranked fighter. Alias the Witch of Holy Thorns, Perceforêt.

ELLIOT FORSTER
Fought with Dorotea during the Phoenix, with whom he advanced to the semifinals.

QUEENVALE ACADEMY FOR YOUNG LADIES

SYLVIA LYYNEHEYM
Queenvale's top-ranked fighter, student council president, and popular idol.

MILUŠE
Rusalka's leader. Vocalist and lead guitarist.

PÄIVI
Rusalka's drummer.

MONICA
Rusalka's bassist.

TUULIA
Rusalka's rhythm guitarist.

MAHULENA
Rusalka's keyboardist.

YUZUHI RENJOUJI
Studies the Amagiri Shinmei Style Archery Techniques. Acquainted with Ayato.

MINATO WAKAMIYA
Leader of Team Kaguya. Alias Indomitable Perseverance, Kennin Fubatsu.

characters

PETRA KIVILEHTO
Chairwoman of Queenvale Academy for Young Ladies.

VIOLET WEINBERG
Alias the Witch of Demolition, Overfiezel.

NEITHNEFER
Queenvale Academy for Young Ladies' second-ranked student. Alias the Goddess of Dance, Hathor.

OTHERS

HARUKA AMAGIRI
Ayato's elder sister. Her whereabouts had been unaccounted for, but she was discovered in a deep sleep, from which Ayato woke her using his wish for winning the Gryps.

SAKURA AMAGIRI (AKARI YACHIGUSA)
Ayato's and Haruka's mother.

MASATSUGU AMAGIRI
Ayato's and Haruka's father.

ISABELLA ENFIELD
Claudia's mother. The top executive of the integrated enterprise foundation Galaxy.

URSULA SVEND
Sylvia's teacher. Her body has been taken over by the Varda-Vaos.

VARDA-VAOS
An Orga Lux capable of usurping the mind of its user. Currently in possession of Ursula's body.

SISTER THERESE
The representative from the orphanage Julis is supporting.

DANILO BERTONI
Former Chairman of the Festa Executive Committee. Died several years ago.

NICOLAS ENFIELD
Claudia's father.

FLORA KLEMM
A young girl from the orphanage Julis is supporting.

HELGA LINDWALL
Head of Stjarnagarm.

MADIATH MESA
Chairman of the Festa Executive Committee.

MICO YANASE
Announcer at the Festa.

BUJINSAI YABUKI
Eishirou's father, and the head of the Yabuki Clan, aka the Night Emit.

JAN KORBEL
Director of the hospital treating Haruka.

JOLBERT
Julis's elder brother and the king of Lieseltania.

LADISLAV BARTOŠIK
A genius researcher in the field of meteoric engineering. Creator of numerous Orga Luxes, including the Varda-Vaos and the Pan-Dora.

THE WORLD OF *THE ASTERISK WAR* GLOSSARY

THE INVERTIA

A mysterious disaster that befell Earth in the twentieth century. Meteors fell all over the world for three days and three nights, destroying many cities. As a result, the strength of existing nations declined considerably, and a new form of economic power known as "integrated enterprise foundations" took their place.

A previously unknown element called *mana* was extracted from the meteorites, leading to advances in scientific technology as well as a new type of human with extraordinary powers, called Genestella.

The Invertia was undetected by all the observatories in the world, and the destruction it caused was actually much less than ordinary meteors, so the pervading theory is that it did not consist of normal meteors.

INTEGRATED ENTERPRISE FOUNDATION

A new type of economic entity formed by corporations that merged to overcome the chaotic economic situation following the Invertia. Their power far surpasses that of the diminished nations.

There used to be eight IEFs, but there are currently six: Galaxy, EP (Elliot-Pound), Jie Long, Solnage, Frauenlob, and W&W (Warren & Warren). They vie for advantage over one another and effectively control the world. Each one sponsors an academy in Asterisk.

THE FESTA

A fighting tournament where students compete, held in Asterisk, and operated by the IEFs. Each cycle, or "season," consists of three events: the tag match (Phoenix) in the summer of the first year, the team battle (Gryps) in the fall of the second year, and the individual match (Lindvolus) in the winter of the third year. Victory is achieved by destroying the opponent's school crest, and the rules are set forth in the Stella Carta. As the event is held for entertainment, acts of deliberate cruelty and attacks intended to cause death or injury can be penalized.

The event is the most popular one in the world, with matches broadcast internationally. The IEFs prioritize economic success and growth above all else, so the direction of the Festa has always been driven by the majority demand of consumers. (This is why the fighters are students—viewers want to see beautiful boys and girls fight one another.) Some speak out against the Festa on ethical grounds, but under the rule of the IEFs, those voices have fallen from justified dissent to unpopular opinion.

The cultures of the different schools veer to extremes, which is also by design, for the sake of the Festa.

THE STELLA CARTA

Rules that apply strictly to all the students of Asterisk. Those who violate these rules are harshly penalized, sometimes by expulsion. If a school is found to have been involved, the administration can also be subject to penalty. The Stella Carta has been amended several times in the past. The most important items are as follows:

- Combat between students of Asterisk is permitted only insofar as the intent is to destroy the other's school crest.
- Each student of Asterisk shall be eligible to participate in the Festa between the ages of 13 and 22, a period spanning ten years.
- Each student of Asterisk shall participate in the Festa no more than three times.

MANA

A previously unknown element that was brought to Earth by the Invertia. By now, it can be found all over the world. It responds to the will of living beings who meet certain criteria, incorporating surrounding elements to form objects and create phenomena.

GENESTELLA

A new type of human being, born after regular human children were exposed to mana. With an aura known as prana, they possess physical abilities far beyond those of ordinary humans. Genestella who can tap into mana without special equipment are called Stregas (female) and Dantas (male).

Discrimination against Genestella is a pervasive social problem, and many students come to Asterisk to escape this. (The negative bias against Genestella is one reason why opposition to the Festa is in the minority.)

PRANA

A kind of aura unique to Genestella. Stregas and Dantas deplete prana as they use their powers. They lose consciousness if they run out of prana, but it can simply be replenished with time. The manipulation of prana is a basic skill among Genestella, and by focusing it, they can increase offensive or defensive strength. This is especially effective for defense, which explains why serious injuries among Asterisk students are rare despite the common use of weapons.

METEORIC ENGINEERING

A field of science that studies mana and the meteorites from the Invertia. Many mysteries remain pertaining to mana, but experimentation on manadite has advanced significantly. Fueled by the abundance of rare metals found in the meteorites, manadite research has yielded a large variety of practical applications.

MANADITE

A special ore made of crystallized mana. If stress is applied, it can store or retain specific elemental patterns. Before the Invertia, it did not exist on Earth, and it must be extracted from meteorites. Manadite is used in Lux activators, as well as manufactured products developed through meteoric engineering.

LUX

A type of weapon with a manadite core. Records of elemental patterns are stored in pieces of manadite and re-created using activators. By gathering mana from the surroundings, they can create blades or projectiles of light. Mana also acts as the energy source for Lux weapons.

URM-MANADITE

A name for exceptionally pure manadite, much rarer than ordinary manadite. Luxes using urm-manadite are known as Orga Luxes. Urm-manadite crystals come in myriad colors and shapes, and no two are the same. They are said to have minds of their own.

ORGA LUX

A weapon using urm-manadite as its core. Many of them have special powers, but using them takes a toll—a certain "cost." The weapons themselves have something akin to a sentient will, and unsuitable users cannot even touch the weapon. Suitability is measured by means of a compatibility rating.

Most Orga Luxes are owned by the IEFs and are entrusted to the schools of Asterisk for the purpose of lending them to students with high compatibility ratings.

YUU MIYAZAKI
ILLUSTRATION BY okiura
THE ASTERISK WAR
14.STRUGGLE FOR SUPREMACY

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